Abstract Maverick
By Brett W. Urben

1.

Rain pelts the plastic scenery below as I scan for my targets. I care only about one, but her two friends could prove useful in the long run. No worries if they bail, though. My binocular overlay glitches every few seconds when the rain grows too heavy for stabilizers to compensate. Maintaining one thousand hertz refresh is hard in near-typhoon levels of rain. My quarry enter my scope and I snap a few shots before I deactivate my overlay and fumble for a cigarette in my bomber jacket pocket. The smell of lighter fluid brings my mind to simpler times and the taste of tobacco smoke wakes it back up to a “silent” alarm pounding against my forehead.

Target acquired. Also, please refrain from inhaling tobacco smoke. Estimated loss of life: 13.7 hours.

Good, I think to her. Billie Fox at it again, only this time, she’s ruining my last cigarette. “Great timing,” I whisper under my breath. *They’re only half a minute late this time, Fox*.

I check my pockets for the drives, find them wet, but probably functional, and take off down the fire escape. The cool steel, coated in rust and probably gallons of dried blood, soothes my inflamed ego. I really need the cash and this is my last shot. My overlay projects itself into view and warns me of potential slippage from a second ago. Thing could really use an update. Unfortunately, after thirteen stays in psych wards, psychosecurity is more important than a stumble down a fire escape.

The rain grows heavier and I’m forced to disengage my portable holoscanner. Won’t be much good anyway in the midst of things. I notice a blinking, neon baby blue sign telling me they have vacancies. The office is closed. Thank fuck. This complex’s management wouldn’t appreciate my snooping here much longer. I stop by their front door and check myself in the blue reflection. My face is ragged and I look like I’ve been bot-swarmed by Satan for the past two weeks. My jacket flaps in the wind as it picks up pace and I pull the balaclava from my forehead down over my face. I double check that my electromagnetic nine millimeter pistol is set to sublethal and stare back into my own visage. This prison will burn and I will with it. Programmer save me.

Billie’s voice pops into my mind. *Message from contact. Is she prettier than me?*

I sigh. *Just play it already.*

Fox’s smile dances across my overlay while I hear Chile, my customer and hopefully an informant soon, tell me that they’re at the cafe and looking to be seated.

I toss a scan down the alleyway and see the women, anxious and probably exhausted, keeping themselves together with all this rain. Their faces are weary but their auras are golden, with a certain darkness underneath. They’re wired and look like they could blow. Explode, I mean. The former wouldn’t be half bad, though. Can’t remember the last time I got strange from one of these deals.

They check in with the hostess at the nearby cafe, taking their seats under a fashionable and sturdy umbrella. The downpour grows and the girls shriek when their umbrellas collapse inward, one by one. The hostess, wearing all black and carrying her data slate, maintains her gleeful countenance while redirecting the girls indoors.

I shuffle down the alley toward the cafe and notice two kittens fighting over one of their mothers’ teets. The growls are disheartening so with a quick click of a side switch I activate silent and lethal mode for my nine. I close my eyes tight and fire three rounds, ending the poor souls and making my life just a bit easier.

I sit for a moment in the rain until the adrenaline dumps. Images of Simon and Gene, my only friends for years, my kitten kids, float past my mind, and their rotting corpses’ stench hits me deep.

I’d be crying now if I were a child. I might be now, honestly, but I’m so doped up from tonights entanglement upgrade I can’t tell if the tears or mine or the city’s. The rain slaps against my face, staining my balaclava.

I command my pineal gland for a dose of serotonin to the bloodstream, balancing out the catecholamines. A soothing wave washes over my tense form and I feel the need to hold back tears. Gravity takes its toll and I’m forced to stumble through piles of cheap, junked servos, dead prost-bots, and other assorted trash until I tumble over a sleeping junkie. Shit. He’s not sleeping.

I pull out my holoscanner and get a quick sitrep. *What do you got for me Fox?*

He’s been dead for days. His pallor is awful and his clothes reek of piss and shit, Billie thinks back. *Brown streaks coat his grey sweatpants and black tar covers his fingers. Even this heavy rain can’t wash away this bum’s regrets. The Programmer took him, at least.*

I grimace, but I don’t hold my nose. The sensation is overpowering and I haven’t felt anything real in days. *Take me next, you neglectful fuck. By the way, Fox, can you tell me something useful?*

Successful breach. Aged twenty-three years. Russian-Polish descent. M.D.N.A. scan indicates recent loss of girlfriend after diagnosis of cybernetic-induced schizophrenia.

Fucking Christ. Been there. I would've bought him a beer.

I hate this job.

After catching my breath and notifying Fox to send a delayed report to the local P.D. I reactivate the catecholamine protocol and refocus on my work.

Now, I love this job.

I make my way casually past the cafe and peer through the windows with a thermal scan. I see Chile and her compatriots - pop stars who act as if they don't know any better, but who in fact are helping to orchestrate a mass, planet-wide prison riot. Not my bag, though. I have other plans.

The cafe is a hip, northside joint. A lot of digistoners gather here, trying out the latest hit of whatever dope shit people like me are passing off as drugs today. Smoke from real cigarettes fills the air and soft piano music joins it, played casually by an Elton John hologram. The couches are red leather. Definitely the real deal. I wonder how they got that past EarthGov. Maybe they don't care anymore. Good news to me.

The waitress approaches, wearing skin-tight latex, all black. She hands each of them a data slate. Digital overlays project from their foreheads onto the slates, revealing menus, the time of day, weather, and vital health and financial information. Their athletic casual gear is completely wrecked and the hostess is apologizing profusely for any damage caused, as if it were her fault. These girls have it too easy.

My grey bomber jacket and black jeans are soaked, but I'm steadfast in my desire to meet the girls, exchange info, and get out of dodge. I move toward the front doors, preparing my best Keanu Reeves routine. If I play my cards right I could be getting laid, paid, and well on my way to freedom from this gross human experiment. I knock on the windows, see the girls, smile and-

My foot hits an outcropping of cement on the way to the door and I slip on the rain-slicked surface, falling into a nearby metal bench that a homeless person had until very recently used as a bed and toilet.

My forehead bleeds into the man's remains, creating something I will remember tomorrow morning, I'm sure. The drives fall from my jacket pocket and slam into the wet concrete, forming cracks in their smooth metal. I curse and pick them up. With my silencer firmly attached, I fire a few electromagnetic rounds into the circuitry and dump them in a trashcan a short walk away from the bench. Blue sparks fly outwards from the metal

drum, illuminating a brick wall. For a moment I see the graffiti. A single eyeball that appears to trace my movements. I shake it off. Probably just chemical overload or some new kind of reflective spray paint. My Hawthorn Pantheon Series 9mm is exposed and I see it catch the light of the yellow sign hanging overhead. Instant translators are borked so I can't read whatever it says in French while I force myself to my feet. Hastily, I wrap my jacket round my holstered pistol and accept defeat.

I hustle back down the alleyway toward the fire escape, dodging more potential slippage. Water gushes through drainage pipes from the top of the low rises all the way down to my feet, and the dead junkie is gone. My guess is they sent the bots for M.D.N.A. study and eventual remixture. The Office of Reintegration has little use for homeless people.

I shudder whenever I remember that process. *Remixture.* His body, if it isn't already, will be liquified and probably used for research and genetic experimentation. The Programmer's got a use for him now.

On my way up the escape and to my parked navy blue skycruiser, its battered form resting in the rain like some kind of antique display, my head gently vibrates, generating my assistant Billie Fox. Her voluptuous body and mischievous face with its blue eyes appears in my third eye.

Bill, do you know who that was? She could have-

I respond in anger, *Do you have to remind me? I've already made an ass of myself. I'm out of here. Call me tomorrow. No. Make that next week. See ya.*

Shame you–. A beep signals her retreat into my digital subconscious.

She'll be dialing me for the next few hours. I programmed her that way. With the schizoid disposition I have to make sure I have failsafes. Billie Fox is the ultimate failsafe and, unfortunately, my only friend right now.

A ping signals the end of our conversation and my overlay minimizes into the ether, allowing my brain time to relax. I cut the engine of my cruiser and lean my seat back into rest position. Two boxy holoscanners protrude from the sides of the seat and rotate orthogonally until they receive a full scan of my brain. A green set of lasers bathes my psyche in numinous fear, and the robot sounds like a whirring psychopath - spouting off what sounds like gibberish to me about my likelihood of using necessary force, my ability to justify said force, and if I've ever fallen in love on the job. Standard Syndicate post-mission interrogation. If my answers are inconsistent I may end up mind wiped and reintegrated like most of the poor saps on this planet.

I breathe out an exhausted sigh. These psych evals are getting too much. Is there such a thing as privacy in this world? I know against my own

will that my superior officer jerks off in women's restrooms. Is the Syndicate, my employer, even aware that at least half of their agents have dangerous dependencies? They don't even seem careful to hide it anymore. We've all been through the ringer too many times to count–memory loss, identity reformation, deadly and disturbing field work…

When the scans finish I raise the seat's back and look out the window through the streaks of rain. The megacities are in mourning. Everyone knows it, they just don't realize who died yet. *Insert Coin Here* rises up above a lowrise building housing hundreds of vintage arcade machines from the 2050's. Miles away, gaming heaven…

"Do you find comfort when viewing films related to organized crime? Yes or no."

I exhale in anger. "Z-R0, you really can't be serious. Next."

"That was an acceptable answer. Next question."

"Get me a beer and five minutes of peace of mind and I won't finish tonight's session with a wrench in your servos," I tell him, lighting a digirette with my digital projection's left thumb. The catecholamine hit is weak. "Ugh, I can't take this fake shit anymore." I ditch the digirette and it collapses into nothing the second it "hits" the concrete and fetch a real smoke from my bomber jacket pocket. I inhale and–hell yes, I can go another few rounds. "Where am I needed next, R0?"

"I have Niko for you on line two dash seven."

"Fuck. At least let me drive home, first."

2.

"I can't manage many more this month. System's tightening security, running more checks. Deeper, even," I whisper into the digital abyss screensaver with my operator's face on it. "I've wasted five wannabes and turned three to the darklight so far. Isn't that enough for some R-&-R?"

I hawk a loogie out of my apartment window, hoping it slams against the windshield of a cruiser whizzing by. It hits nothing and I lean back inside, staring at my dingy hole. Ratty posters of Tupac Shakur, Goethe, Slavoj Zizek, Abigail Martin… they stare at me and I look away. The cream-colored walls are peeling and the single floodlight I use begins to flicker. Shit, I need to run another juice-up.

I scan for my zero-point energy device while Niko rambles some more shit into my ear. "It's up to you, Bill. You know that's not even enough for a mem retrieval, let alone a live encounter with a prost-bot," Niko replies.

"Fuck mem retrieval. With my shit I can relive anything I want, but with heaven thrown in for good measure. I need something more…" I find the device and set it for three minutes, giving me just enough juice to sleep

warm tonight. If I let it run indefinitely I'll get a visit from the DIA and a bed in a cemetery. I keep my language careful in case the authorities think they know better than I do about psychosecurity. "I need access to, um, deeper levels…" I get real cautious. "Deeper than, uh, deep. Feel me? I need knowledge. Who knows when the job will take me down? I can't get wiped again, Niko. This is my last go-round. It has to be."

My patience wears thin and I check my holowatch. 1:01. Weird, I can't tell if it's morning or night. I look outside. It's definitely dark. My choice is to remain in this liminal, quantum space, unsure of the time. The lack of certainty is where the magic happens in my side hustle.

A dazzling light show from my watch reminds me it's almost time for melatonin release. A bit counterintuitive if you ask me. I need to get around to rejiggering it.

Niko replies, "Uh, um, no, sir. I do not provide such services. Please contact customer support for such inquiries if necessary." I hear a devilish chuckle erupt from his slavic mouth.

If I can't get deeper right now, if my fucked up brain stem keeps me needing sex and craving death–if it won't let me know more about reality–then I'll just get laid instead. I look down at my wrist and the holowatch displays Cassandra Kinkade's ident, address, and it suggests I drop her a line. Another consensual invasion of my deepest desires. I feel my heart sink and memories of Cassie float on by. I stare at the ceiling for a moment then hit send on a preprogrammed greeting I've been meaning to shoot to her for weeks.

Niko blathers on some more. "I can hook you up with the cheapest-yet-somehow-cleanest-I-promise prostbot pussy only the most desperate of engineering geniuses could have invented!" He's really trying here.

Cassie is the only live, human girl I can afford. She floated me a discount because of our past–a discount I desperately utilize. I haven't been with her in a long while, though. I forget how long. She closes up shop in an hour. My former partner's side gig isn't my favorite when it's not me utilizing her, but, hey, I'm a radical male feminist. Shacking up with her is sleeping in the eye of a storm, but she gets me and I feel as if I get her, too.

Also, I've done my duty to the higher ups. I'm still human, aren't I? Don't I deserve some slack? Yeah, I fucked up tonight, but that means I need it, even if some internal authority says I haven't earned it. My biology demands release. I tap my foot while Niko rattles off another group of creator-descendants possibly ready for interrogation and re-entrainment. The Ones and Zeroes–some kind of revolutionary hacker collective I have no intentions of following up on until tomorrow night at the earliest.

Fuck it.

I push a few empty bottles off my desk, making room for my bruised elbows. One smashes on to the floor, sending a shard directly into my big toe. The pain is unbearable for an instant and the instant rage emanating from my chest could melt steel beams. I look down at the floor and see the Jah Feel Caribbean Rum's mascot's eyes leering at me, accusing me of every ism–from alcoholism to Buddhism. I kick it over and curse its frailty.

The grey, carpeted floor is stained and the smell of rum invades my olfactory space. My eyes dart back up to the ceiling and I exhale deeply. When I look back the stain is gone and the bottle is upright again. Rain starts pelting my window and making my collection of *The Matrix* figurines wet. My toe feels the pain from glass, but there's no evidence to suggest the pain should exist.

Digidrug-induced schizophrenic delusions aside, this injury isn't shit compared to what I normally pull. I've had junkies empty entire nine clips into my groin and still had enough gas in my tank to walk myself into reconstructive surgery. My employers say they love me like a son, but I'm nothing more than a hired gun. Syndicate investigative operations are a real bitch. Reconstructive crotch repair is no laughing matter. I chuckle to myself. That isn't parental affection, you shady bastards.

"I don't need a prost-bot. I'll just go to Cass," I rattle off to Niko, who probably didn't hear me.

I've had to run digidrugs for years now. Since even before my days at the academy–the days I've been allowed to remember, anyway. I discovered the truth about Earth: it's one giant, planetary prison. EarthGov, in contact with extraplanetary civilizations, maintains the simulatory reality us Earthers have woken up in. Every time we die, our minds are wiped clean and we are processed and reinserted. The population is riddled with sadists and criminals–some violent, others simple tax evaders. Only a select few are allowed to remember why they are even here, and even they never get the full story. We are trapped here. Doomed to relive our lives and be a feast to a vast, unfeeling system that knows only growth at all cost. The Syndicate revealed my past misdeeds: drug smuggling and political rebellion. A righteous combo, if I do say so myself.

Enough doom and gloom.

Niko says, in his heavy eastern european accent, "Bro, please. She doesn't care about you, bro. Please. Come on, bro!"

I yawn and tell him, "Uh huh. Super interesting," hoping he gets the picture.

It’s a nightmare scenario that few can comprehend emotionally let alone intellectually. After so many erasures and reinsertions, most would rather stay plugged in to the simulacra of reality–the one where everything has meaning, where they’re innocent citizens, striving to make it to the top of the food chain. It’s even hard to live with the knowledge that you may be trapped on this planet for the rest of time, never knowing the truth about the past, nor even your own identity. EarthGov keeps the information locked away somewhere on Luna I’ve heard. Regardless–what’s most important is learning to let things go.

Lao Tzu was right. Attachments to this planet only serve to imprison us. Everything that keeps us here is temporary except for the souls we meet. What’s most difficult is foregoing attachment to the rare few souls that count.

Whether we have our minds wiped or we go back to our original homes, we’ll probably never see one another again. I’m imprisoned for some reason and they won’t even tell me why beyond some cryptic bullshit. How am I not supposed to believe that what they tell me is my reason for being here isn’t simply another method of control? Of keeping me plugged in, willing to serve because of some nebulous hope that I’ll earn my freedom?

Fuck that. I want out. I have my own plans. For now, though, the Syndicate is home.

I stare at my slate, connected wirelessly to my smart-yet-still-shit apartment. Tech and art from the 1980’s, 90’s, and 2000’s line this shithole box, its walls in constant disrepair. The ceiling leaks dirty water into a bucket on the floor. A useless rotary telephone complements what most would deem trash: an old tube television and a few classic game systems. These trinkets keep me company when I’m too angry with Fox.

I wonder if she’s okay. Of course she is. I programmed her. She makes me forget she isn’t real flesh and blood sometimes.

Niko continues, “Yes, but the skin is real! Lab-grown! You can’t tell the difference anymore!”

Also, at least half of the general population, by recent state statistical estimation anyway, are sadists who have consciously enacted their violent wills upon undeserving victims at some point in their pasts, whether remembered or not. And post death memory loss is no excuse according to EarthGov and its enforcers.

The government isn’t much help to a digi-dope dealer, regardless. Either they go or I do. For myself it’s been over half a million years imprisoned here. I gave up hope for rescue long ago. The few of us left that haven’t defected or completely lost our minds due to trauma or, worse, *love*,

are trying our damndest to escape without the torture and brainwash routine. We're still trapped here with eleven billion lost, tortured and potentially bloodthirsty souls.

I've nearly completely lost hope while Niko rambles into my ear about how humans have invented an even newer model of fuckbot. The A.I. algorithms are so advanced that they needed to invent a sequel to the Turing test for legal reasons alone. Let's not even broach the subject of fuckbot soul-insertion. I bristle at the thought.

"With the mortality rate at literally twice of what it used to be, should we really be caring at all about this?" I ask Niko, who kindly ignores my question and continues dictating what I believe to be his exegesis.

I would care if I had gotten laid in the past two months.

Unfortunately, I have not and now there is no return. My gun hath replaced my bride. I chuckle while fondling the safety of my McKarrin Bloodsucker, admiring its chrome finish.

My nanomimetic tattoo sits obvious and ugly on my neck. An older version of the souped up, sexy stylings they sell our kids now. It feeds my brain the data necessary to execute the normally too-complex-for-monkey-to-handle math necessary for neural alignment with my conscious Will - and my Will is that of The Programmer, according to EarthGov. I rejected it at first, but found my own interpretations. Religion has its purpose despite its nature as a tool for the system. Rediscovering Daoism through underground back channels helped me realize that.

Made of self replicating nanomachines, the nanomimetic tattoo receives information instantaneously via quantum entanglement with nodes of the extranet. Supercharged intuition with only the *slight* risk of absolute psychosis and brain death.

Sent via neurochemicals in my bloodstream, my brain receives instructions and healing protocols that facilitate the reification and projection of my mind's contents into the physical world. Its uses are infinite, but its risks run just as deep. If I had the time to reprogram it properly, I could probably force hallucinations on half the populace of Fornulk.

Niko continues. "... and best of all, my friend says he forgot she had fake pussy! AHA HA HA!"

His laughter grinds against my eardrums. "Cool, so can I just get paid and be done for the night? I have places to be."

"Pfft- whatever! Bye!" An air-clearing *beep* signals the call's end as Niko's eastern european visage vanishes from the digital space in front of my eyes, replaced by my 1990's television set, its for-show antenna, and the Super Nintendo video game system attached to it and plugged into the small

zero-point energy converter Niko built for me. The converter is plugged into the wall, feeding the electrical outlets of the rest of the apartment, whose plaster has been showing since before I moved in. I finally shut the window and the rhythm of the rain soothes me.

I grab the nearby remote, hit the power button, and The Isley Brothers take me away to a simpler place. Serene.

And fake.

I shut it off, my feelings taking the lead.

To be a citizen of EarthGov and a Syndicate member who knows too much requires that I periodically wipe my memory of the oppressing reality of my situation. I am behind enemy lines at all times. Even at my safest, I am not safe. It's against protocol, but the chemical assistance helps more than most understand. My methods are neither Syndicate-approved nor Earth-legal, but the system allows the proliferation of drugs for a reason. It keeps the blood of global capitalism flowing up to the brain of this world, to the paid-off, wealthy criminal rulers and their egghead sycophants who design new methods of control in return for some semblance of comfort. Cowards.

With the press of another button, my tattoo shimmers and my brain receives a course of dopamine, serotonin, and GABA. Laura Branagan's Self Control plays in my mind's ear and I can feel my forehead pulsate. My mind envisions an old flame with black hair, sharp eyebrows, lashes that could kill a man, and tan skin, beckoning me into the ocean after her.

She dives in and swims deep - too deep for me,I realize, as a mermaid causes the surface to erupt in hydrated orgy. This Neptunian goddess grabs me by the wrist and sends me down. Down into the black, where I open my eyes and see Super Mario World greeting me on my tube television.

The music brings me such peace that playing a video game seems trite in comparison to my real work. I get up, still feeling the flow of creation beckoning me onward, and meander over to my desk, an old thing I picked up for a few hundred creds. It would be beautiful to me if my blacklight didn't reveal its disgusting secrets.

I sit down, press a pedal with my left foot, and watch as a holographic display shows the day's memories, dreams, and daydreams so far - all available to be mixed, remixed, and recreated to my heart's content.

The world could always use more geniuses. I've been on the hunt for the perfect digi-drug - that of the genius mind. This drug will bring any normal soul to the point of mental godhood, giving it the genius's ability to connect seemingly disparate concepts, bringing these ideas together to discover higher syntheses of thought. A lot of starving artists and academics would pay top dollar for something like that, but I have to remain cautious. If

the Syndicate discovers my extracurricular activities I could be censured, completely wiped, and reinserted. I'd be just a regular enforcer again, only allowed memory recollection if the higher ups deign it acceptable.

But, imagine supercharged feminine intuition with the thinking of a quantum scientist. Imagine accessing the divine abilities of an autistic savant, but with grace and emotional understanding.

That's my hope, anyway. The reality is that I've fed a legion of junkies and found maybe a handful of worthwhile minds worthy of further testing. Most I serve are Dante's Ignavi. Worthless, floating souls, trapped in a decadent bliss of compliance that leads nowhere. They are human refuse according to this system. Pure garbage meant for endless reincarceration and, eventually, the garbage. Garbage in, garbage out.

It's still money in my pocket.

A downside of being trapped in a human body is that one hemisphere of my dual-aspect brain is always trying to convince the other that it is correct. Especially after all of the drugs, material and digital, that I've abused. My left brain wants me to believe that meaningless matter is all that exists and that I am barely more than a meager ape, sent to Earth to fuck and feast. It was programmed by EarthGov during reincarceration and is still receiving biological commands to achieve and reproduce.

I, as well as most of my compatriots in the New North American Republic, deny this programming through the gratuitous use of substances and cybernetic psychology.

With flicks of my wrists and ankles over the course of a few hours I've designed a new drug that will be utilized via the right hemisphere of the brain, expanding creative awareness but also strengthening the corpus callosum to support the process. The left brain is almost completely suppressed. The user's ego will be completely unaware of its presence. I'd never do this myself (yeah, sure), but to each their own.

This sinusoidal function has the three dimensional appearance of a sheep grazing, enjoying the warm sun in seventy two degree weather. It has the feeling of a calm summer's day with near zero humidity. The user's limbic system should respond well to this one. Should become highly suggestive. I make a note in my overlay to keep this one away from potential predators. One scan from Billie tells me all I need to know about most people. If one were to get their hands on this and used it for their own nefarious ends, I'd welcome a memory wipe.

After spamming a few thousand accounts with the details–the drug's name, who to ask for when calling, the new number, etc–I lean back and pop open a nearby drawer. Inside are some rolling papers and some classic

Canadian weed. Digi-highs are cool, but nothing compares to Mother Nature's soothing caress at the end of a long work week. With renewed vigor I activate my overlay and see an image of Cassie Kinkade, my former partner. A sure thing. By sure thing I mean the bane of my existence. I'm the bane of hers at this point, no doubt. I hit dail and wait out the tension.

I hear a beep and she answers. "Again with this shit? You said you were done last time."

I grimace. "Isn't that how it always goes? By the way, it'd be way easier if we could just sync up like the old days. I hate being recorded." I sing into the phone.

"I know. That's why you're being recorded. And no. Goodbye." She hangs up.

I curse the abyss and dial her again. Please answer.

A click and her voice. "No!"

"I got some new shit! And some old shit! C'mon, baby, you know I'm the only man who makes you feel like god! I mean, like, good…" I burp.

She sighs so loud my ears shatter. "Fine."

I suppress the guilt with cannabis and rum.

3.

Cassie Kinkade's front door security scanner picks me up. Her shack formerly a creamy white, but now yellowing, is dilapidated. Corners of the roof sag under the relentless rain. I worry about her state of mind and the past. The screen door is hanging on one hinge, the rocking chairs we used to smoke from are on their sides, moldy and wet, and I don't see her beautiful Porfidis Skycruiser in the driveway.

Instead it's a beater from maybe a decade or two ago.

I picked up some new mindware on the way here. The upgrade should help with emotional intelligence. Things really need to work out between us. Suppressing Billie Fox has left me with the bare awareness of my own loneliness. The cold, aching need for something real.

Cassie pings me, letting me know I'm being recorded as I walk up her miserable house's creaking steps. As I prepare to knock I hear a high pitched tone winding up and I look to my left. Cassy is pointing her trusty Sidewinder - set to stun, I hope - right at my crotch from below the deck.

"Deactivate whatever new shit you got going in that head of yours," she demands, staring down the barrel at my gonads, goading them either toward her or diametrically from her. I prefer the former, but know she wants

the latter, so I bow my head in shame and ease my way along the foyer wall towards her candy jar.

Her double barrel plasma shotgun guides itself towards my shadowy form while my hands remain as visible as possible in the dim lighting. No candy in the bowl. Where's the love?

"That's enough, you drug-dealing, nepobaby trash." What appears to be a disappointed grimace turns into a disappointed glare. I notice her hands trembling, relenting. Allowing. She exhales deeply, muttering some curse words under her breath and shaking head. Finally, a graceful, beautiful look of compassion.

My mind's eye turns to two years ago when we parted ways for what I assume we both thought to be the last time.

4.

We're outside the Grand Larceny nightclub, deep into sector forty-two. The rain pierces the air and slaps my face with full force. Neon signs and tire-based vehicles surround us. My vision's blurry, but I can make out a dark alley across the street.

Cassandra's wearing a soaked red dress and her right thigh is bleeding onto my new tracksuit - the black one with white trim by that corporation that openly aided the Nazis at the end of the second millennium. Her breasts are nearly exposed and I'm doing my best to keep them contained while I drag her ass to safety.

I can't carry her properly without my shoulder reverberating unbearable pain. It's been dislocated for at least an hour now, and even Schwarzenegger couldn't slam it back into place without my brain short-circuiting and my mindware malfunctioning and leaving me in a limbo that I never want to perceive again. I get her into the alley and we both tumble into a pile of trash. A bum screams, but crawls away the moment he sees the blood. There's always a new pet rat for the authorities waiting in the shadows for MDNA recombination. I gently slap Cassie's cheek and tell her to keep her wound compressed.

Billie, hit me with a bullet retrieval program. Juice me up. Can't do this on my own.

Downloading, babe. You know, you could just let her go. We'd be together forever. JK LOL.

I chuckle despite the scene. Her humor never gets old. *I needed that. Thanks, hon.* I give Cassie a second to respond. *She's not giving me anything. I'm giving you front row seats*, I tell her as I project her into

Cassie’s pineal implant. Billie Fox’s anima projection mixes with my perception of Cassie and the two become one.

Billie gasps in agony, throwing me for a second, and pushes against her bullet hole. I press my palm against Cassie’s tattoo and supercharge her through pure intuitive entanglement, activating her pain killer protocol. Our right brains fully synchronize and I gasp for air from the adrenaline rush.

Billie relaxes and manages to keep the wound sealed while I rip my still-dry red shirt from underneath my bomber jacket. I remove her hand, wrap the wound, and with a quick count to three, pull her to her feet.

Can she handle the walk? I ask Billie.

I don’t trust it. I’ve got her. Can you handle navigation? She’s genuinely worried. How much can she feel, I wonder?

I shake the philosopher out of my brain. *Babe, I programmed you, remember?* I smirk at her and we hobble off down the rain-battered alley towards the bus station.

Memories of that place keep coming and have kept the two of us in shared trauma for so long. If I’m honest, it’s one of my favorites, saving her.

More memories show their depressive faces.

I lie, barely awake and breathing beneath a pile of dysfunctional automatons. After an hour long battle with an overwhelming force of zombified humanoids, I’m just now able to reach upwards and grab at one of their armor pieces to stabilize and lift myself to a safe position. Homeostasis takes over. My adrenaline dumps and my breathing becomes labored and tough to manage. I grab a nearby autorifle and lift it vertically, using it as a cane. Walking is hard, but doable, and I make it over to Cassie’s body.

She blinks herself awake and comes to. “We built this hell.” She coughs and continues, “But we can fashion something beautiful from it.” Her eyes flutter and what little power remains radiates outwards until her life force is expended over everything in an awesome, holographic wave. We won.

5.

The memories don’t stop.

My vision recedes and I blink awake with a dead shoulder and a near-dead Cassandra begging me for a cigarette.

“Not that digital bullshit you keep trying on me…” She won’t let that go, will she?

I’ve been trying to find the perfect combo of waveforms to simulate a better cigarette than the real thing could ever provide. Unfortunately for her, I believe I’ve reached a paradoxical understanding of ‘the perfect cigarette.’

“Can you stand for a second?” I ask, my face pointed at safe footing. She nods and I gently rest her feet against stable ground. We made it off the bus and I just can’t carry her weight anymore.

My brain will fry if I shove any more chemicals up there.

Her knees buckle and she screams. “Richard H. Programmerson!” Her cacophony disorients me and snaps the real world, or what’s left of it, back to center stage - with myself as the director grimacing at his actors’ poor performances.

Back to the real world. Or whatever’s left of it.

“What the hell are you doing?” Cassie yells, laying her shotgun vertical against the door frame. I knock over the candy bowl while failing to catch myself and fall to the cold, linoleum floor. Cassie’s data slate vibrates in her back pocket as she grabs my jacket collar and drags my ass to the bottom of the stairs.

My head is spinning and the words she’s blathering into the slate are muted. Her cat eyes me like I’m preparing to have my way with his mistress. A black little demon, he just became a father to a whole litter of little bastards. Programmer knows, I miss mine.

The world’s volume crescendos and stabilizes, but there’s a ringing drilling its way into my ear drums. Cassie’s brown eyes look directly into mine and she asks, “Can you make your way to the couch on your own or do I have to carry you?”

“Like old times,” I reply. My arms are limp, feelingless, but my heart is working overtime and my gratitude for Cassie’s limited affection is boundless. But, we’re still trapped in this post traumatic stress hellhole. With these memories, maybe we can spark something again. I regret never taking that step with her. Tying the knot. The Syndicate had other plans at the time. The sex was good–especially what came after–but I know we can be more.

I’m still dreaming of that nonexistent future when I wake up to a bruise on my ass. The pain throbs. I’m lying on the hardwood floor by her plastic-wrapped couch. She’s still tapping away on her data slate, so I try and get up. I rise to my feet and proceed to wobble forward, then collapse. I decide instead to watch TV.

I toss a mental command to her wallscreen. It flickers to life. An advertisement for O’Brien Menthol Cigarettes plays. Sixty-two dollars a pack. What a steal. I need to switch to the digis for good. If my brain can be fooled

into producing a nicotinic response from mental stimuli, then why can't *I* be fooled into believing that the fake smokes are worth a damn?

Cassie wanders back over, slate back in her jeans, sullen expression on her face. She programs a memo for me and darts it to my pineal implant, which projects the message in a form readable to me, but encrypted to outside observers:

SYNDICATE TRANSMISSION RECEIVED
MISSION CODENAME: AD INFINITUM
SUBJECT: ASSET TRANSPORT OR DISPOSAL
MESSAGE: SHIPMENT OF FOURIER PROJECTION DEVICES EN ROUTE TO FORNULK. RETRIEVE OR DESTROY.
PS: Go easy on Bill, Cassie. Mother out.

I close my overlay and exhale noxious fumes. "She always knows how to soften the blow."

"How many times has she saved our asses?" Cassie keeps testing me.

High road. Take the high road.

"Um, I'm not sure. How many times have we saved *theirs*?" My face betrays no humor. "How many times have we been wiped? Care to take a guess?"

Cassie is silent. Ponderous.

Mother and The Syndicate have been a home for me here on Earth. I can move in and out of different jurisdictions, operate with impunity if necessary. The job is addictive. I've risen through the ranks from a simple enforcer to Mother's personal fixer, from getting memory wiped and reinserted as a matter of the job to gaining a position of authority and a permanent identity. Almost every Syndicate member knows the pain of picking up the pieces after having your mind scrambled to maintain confidentiality. EarthGov needs its dirty work done right, someone to deal with the criminal underbelly that's festered for thousands of years. They do their best to track potential troublemakers, but it's a useless endeavor. My work for the Syndicate allows for various side gigs, like digidrug synthesization and distribution. Their M.D.N.A.-embedded identity scramblers keep me safe from automated digital surveillance. Mother would not approve, however. As if anything I do could jeopardize my position. I'm too valuable as a simple tool.

Cassie chuckles and says, "Momma loves you. Cass does not. Get off your ass, get your shit together, and meet me up top in ten."

With that, she ascends the stairs, enters her and her probable boy toy's bedroom, and slams the door–leaving me with my ass pain and a fried nervous system.

Sensing the adrenaline dump, my tattoo sparks to life, feeding my brain, balancing my equation. I rise to my feet, secure my weapon in its holster, fix my clothing and posture, and grab a handful of sour gun gummies from the candy jar. The sugar should do nicely. The tart, artificial blue raspberry flavoring gives life to a memory thought dead.

Cassie's laughing in my face after catching me mid-fart. I'm embarrassed. In this ethereal memory, my desire is to marry her and maybe pump a couple of units into her. But at a deeper level I know I'll never do something so trivial as holding my own flesh and blood in my arms. I'd rather pimp out my girlfriends for an info dump or drug enemies of the Syndicate into cyberpsychosis. The job is all I have. Until something changes in me when I hear her innocent laughter. Something softens, allows the past to be left behind.

Programmer's sake… My eyes are watering. Cassie's living room doesn't feel real. Dissociation is getting worse. Nothing feels real. She looks over at me and we lock eyes. I hear her yell, but her lips don't move. I can't believe she kept a direct sync-link.

"Get your ass up the stairs! I'll be on the roof in sixty!" Her voice shakes me awake. She's in that mood. When financially validated violence is on the table, Cassie always manages to hit her stride. I rattle my head around, breathe for a moment, and activate my overlay. I run a vitals scan. Things seem nominal–for my digi-addled brain, at least–and hop to my feet, jogging up the stairs with a jagged rhythm.

A ping in my inner ear. An instant message from Niko. The Blue Moth is having a half-off drinks for its depressive cunts special. Prick thinks he's a comedian. I set Niko to silent mode, shuffling him to the back of my mind. Billie needs some company.

I pass by what looked to me earlier like a man's bedroom, bulky clothing far too big for her strewn about the floor and bed, but, knowing Cassie, it could easily be hers or even a girlfriend's. I shudder at the thought of her with even another woman. I know I shouldn't care. That future is gone from me now. The one that made sense. Now it's me and my artificial anima. I need a reality check. Human interaction. Thank the Programmer for this job. It's all I've got now.

Her Ferreti Extreme skycruiser has been warming up for a few minutes when she finally bursts forth from the roof's screen door with two beer bottles in her hand, shotgun on her back, and her emotional wavelength set to calm hypomania.

I ask her "Aren't you burning the juice a little? Also, where the hell did this come from?" I tap the dashboard. "Thought you reverted. Wanted to save money or something."

"New model." She taps her neck and her tattoo, a mermaid, vibrates and shines, pulsating with bright blue energy. Her veins are alight and I can almost see a golden aura surrounding her head. I blink my eyes a few times and the colors disappear.

With a nod from Cassie, the vehicle goes silent and reflective polygons ripple out from its sides. We're enshrouded in a cloak of faux invisibility, safe from all but the deepest of area scans. "Ready? We should have plenty of time. Levels should remain steady for at least sixteen hours–maybe even twenty if I don't need to carry your ass. I prepared for that, though." She chuckles and tosses a bottle at me.

This isn't her, this is her brain chemistry on fire. Her chance to get back into the field, to get a promotion. To flex on our superiors who don't do a damn thing worth mentioning to anyone on the streets. We stay in the line of fire so that some suits can run deals with our oppressors in the thin hopes that maybe we'll get either a piece of the action or an escape route. I don't know what I prefer anymore.

I shake my head and blink away the bullshit. Escape. That's all that matters.

I catch the beer bottle and ask her, "Are these necessary? Niko just told me Carla's is raging right now. We could just say fuck it to Mother and her bullshit. Bail on this mission." I always get nervous when challenging Mother's authority. The Syndicate will end your life without a second thought or flat out wipe and reintegrate your ass. The god damn brass, the decision makers, don't know what field work does to a person.

And *I* have to practice mindfulness and meditation? Self-wipe and resynthesize all of the trauma, the knowledge? While *they* cruise around in the ninety six percent of reality that humans aren't allowed to even perceive? Rich, pompous bastards. They claim they have our best interests at heart, that they all started out like we did. Absolute bullshit. There's been a hierarchy in place since the jump. No one can know everything. Company compartmentalization means anyone with the proper clearance can act is if no one suffers.

I’m going to have a schizoid breakdown if I keep thinking about this shit. Thank god she brought the beer. This work-related guilt would have pushed me too far tonight to get any work done–especially with Niko pinging my ass day and night. I forgot the last time I was wiped and remixed, when I probably pissed off the wrong executive. My thoughts turn to my biomother and biofather.

Whoever they were, they’re now long forgotten and probably dead.

It leaves almost as soon as it arrives, but I notice a sensation. Something new that strikes without warning. The air grows cooler, crisp. I’m assaulted by a deep sense of dread, something that isn’t me, unnatural. The city, drenched in rain and flooding fast, draws my attention. A skyscraper flickers–some kind of interference that shouldn’t exist. Then, a cascade of glitches reverberates out from the building like a drop in a pond. I grip the dashboard, eyes wide, when the wave approaches, bracing for impact. It comes closer, my gut sinks. I try to yell to Cassie, but she’s vibing to some reggae track. The force finally hits us and–nothing. I glance back at the skyscraper. It’s solid, rigid, towering over everything else. I relax my grip and sink into the seat, closing my eyes.

I light a cigarette and go with the flow.

6.

We alternate swigs of cheap South American beer with laughter and bullshit while Cassie’s autopilot does most of the work. Her car’s artificial intelligence stabilizes her tipsy calculus as we manage a polite conversation for once. We don’t consider our own safety particularly important right now. Thankfully, the nav system does.

I finish the bottle and place into the side panel. “So, why the hell should I care about some shipment of projection tech?” I yell over the driving beat of the cruiser’s house music. The dashboard rattles when it hits a hard right, a Cassie-designed shortcut, I’m sure. My stomach churns. “Can’t the Syndicate send some low-tier goons?”

“Isn’t it obvious? We *are* those goons,” she replies.

Our car swerves around a skyscraper, cutting off a lane of traffic, drawing the ire of several drivers whose horns barely make it through the dance music.

“Wait.” My brain short-circuits and my tattoo pulses, a failsafe of raw power - shielding my thoughtless ass. My eyes widen and I cough, struggling for oxygen. Another glitch in my system. Funny how Z-R0 didn’t pick up on that. I recover after a moment and ask, “How much are we making on this?”

She smiles and rain starts slamming into the Ferreti's windshield. "Enough to pay off my house and the arsenal I've been building." Her skycar cuts off a few more floating drivers and does a barrel roll underneath the tenth street bridge, almost grazing the cracked and broken streets below.

I take a moment to look at her. She's beautiful when she lets loose. Her one track mind is alluring. She just wants money and guns. I can support an attitude like that. She doesn't worry about escaping this prison. She wants a better life. I sympathize, but something in me can't just lay down and play the game much longer. I want out.

So do, I, Billie chirps in my mind.

Quiet, Billie. You know how Cassie gets. We'll be synched soon.

You can't play both sides forever, darling, she coos.

I send a standby command and she disengages.

Cassie at least has a plan in place. Here I am bitching like a coward–hating my job and life–but committing myself to both for structurally unsound reasons. It's probably nothing more than fear of whatever our imprisoners truly are, how deep their deceit runs. My brain can't possibly process it all, hence the memory management. I keep myself out of everything that is not immediately necessary for me to know at this point. Information overload is a serious problem in a line of work that requires snap decision making and field survival.

There's a history between us, but I can't remember most of it. For every new piece of intel that streams in from my work, another cherished memory fades into the background, into oblivion. Sure, the unconscious stores everything, but the medical science required for memory restoration is brutal. High failure rates. If I'm going to be wiped I might as well do it by choice, consciously.

Thank the Programmer that Cassie is still by my side in this techno-hellscape. The shit I have seen, *am seeing*. The glitches, the false memories, the hallucinations–whatever they are. Something is out there and it's becoming more aware of me, testing me. It's getting worse and I'm too afraid to tell anyone. Mother can't know. I'll get wiped and demoted. Cassie will just chalk it up to drug abuse. Maybe she would be right.

Black clouds appear and grow close. Blue electrical storms shatter the space around them. I start to worry. My grip tightens again. I run my hand along the smooth steel of my pistol for comfort. The rain hits harder and streaks of water blur the lines between solid matter and perception.

Cassie looks over at me. "You are using way too much of your own shit. What are you on right now? I won't tell M. I promise." A rare moment of sympathy from my ex. Anything is possible.

I blink away my emotional vulnerability and tell her, “I don’t know.” I look out her window at the drab scene and my vision starts to vibrate. Everything around me shakes. “Job’s been tough. What else can I say? Can we move on?”

7.

Cassy parks the Ferreti amidst a mass of expensive looking vehicles that will be sold at below M.S.R.P. on a shady dock somewhere. Ocean waves crash against the concrete structure floating alone in the expanse. Water hits the parked cars, giving them a glaring sheen.

On this artificial island sits a mansion surrounded by a personal village filled with chain restaurants, a theater, medical services, a museum, and other trillionaire accommodations.

“Spiffy,” Cass muses. The bags under her eyes have deepened. Are the stims already wearing off? What’s going on with her? And how much of it is my fault?

“You know we can end this charade. What’s wrong, Cass?”

“Is this really the time?” She tightens her combat boots and rearranges her black fatigues into a more comfortable positon. “Things haven’t been great since my daughter’s deadbeat dad left. Okay?”

That stings. “Look, if we were capable parents it would have worked out… But we’re killing machines, Cassandra. That’s no childhood. Does she know yet?”

“No. I don’t think they’ll ever tell her.” Fuck. We can’t avoid the black mass in our periphery that is Billie and her involvement with our child. Ever.

I send out a pulse scan and multiple pings designating themselves as prosocial, neutral, or antithetical shine out across the three dimensional mindfield projected onto the grounds.

My left eye can see the field via my right-brain’s fourier projections, while my left brain can maintain spatial awareness. I mentally dial in Cass’s ident and she receives the information necessary to generate the field herself. With both of our brains in synchronous operation, we should have informational dominance over whoever thinks they can protect the devices. Finally, with a quick thought of consent, the two of us sync up our corpora callosa, allowing syncretic movement and telepathic communication.

See them? I think to her.

She looks over, locks eyes with me and nods. I hear the plasma conduction tubes on her double-barrel vibrate to life. Then, an old noise awakens a sense of youth and brings me to a new conscious awareness. The

electromagnetic build-up and near silent discharge of Cass's new weapon. The Gauss Mk. II.

Jealousy infests my brain and past memories start to simmer. Myself grabbing Cass by the pony tail, fucking her from behind while she gasps for air, sweat eliminating all friction.

"Where the hell'd you get that?" I ask.

She looks back at me in perfect synchrony between the two experiences. In one I'm a nervous wreck, in the other I am also a nervous wreck, but having some of the best sex of my life.

"Did you need to ask?" She asks, sweating profusely, breath heavy.

I finish inside of her in the memory. Nine months later, Mandy was born. Now I'm worried about her. Another drop in my bucket of stress and regret.

She's fine, by the way. Cass cuts in before my central nervous system short circuits from the recollection. *Focus. Remember? The adoption? She's fine. How far gone are you?*

Her raw disappointment coats the grey scenery red and my disillusioned anger regarding our past casts a pall over everything. This is a by-product of hemispheric synchronicity–synesthesia. How did I forget about the adoption? My forgetfulness is catching up to me. I've been too afraid to dose myself on my new shit. I may have to after the job is done.

You're right. Sorry. I nod at her and we stow our weapons and walk side by side around the property, scanning for infill and exfil points.

No guards. Shift change. I spot several drones in the sky scanning for hostile life. My palms start to sweat and the rain blurring my vision leaves me uneasy.

Cass thinks to me, *The shipment is supposed to be disguised as an art exhibit. Illegal wave generators sitting in plain sight. You're not gonna do what I think you are, are you?*

What is that, exactly, I reply.

Nevermind.

The air is dry. Synesthesia reveals pink swirls of smell, creating a more pleasant perception than what Fornulk's shit-riddled alleys are capable of producing. My nanomimetic tattoo sends electrical signals to my brain and, before I know it, my blood is flooded with catecholamines. My symptoms improve along with my focus. The fear and paranoia level out, and I feel capable again.

I'm ready to work. For real now.

Unfortunately, all of this brain stem activity heightens my sense of smell. The scent of industrial chemicals permeates the air. Limbic

suppression should kick in soon. I won't give a damn in a few minutes. Hopefully.

To be honest, I was thinking about it, I reply. She expects the old me to kick the door down and rush in, guns ablaze.

I could tell. Hold off the cowboy act. She hunkers down near a chained door, marked by warnings and threats of legal retaliation for trespassing. *Here works. We don't need anything other than the multi, thankfully.* She pulls out her multitool, clicks it a few times and the chains blocking the security entrance for the island's paramilitary firm disintegrate.

She looks up at me with a genuine smile for once in our god damned lives and we head inside, hands gently resting against are sidearms, our limbic systems in near perfect harmony.

I'll stay low-key until the shit hits the fan, I tell her.

She smiles. *I forgot how good we've gotten sometimes.*

I return the smile. *Same.*

Her smile dissolves my fears. Again, we're one. Again, I can breathe. There's nothing to worry about except what's right in front of us. I shush her quietly, and dart my eyes from corner to corner of this strange foyer with vaulted ceilings. Mechanical statues wince and wheeze, their movement jittery.

One of them cocks its neck and sprays a green liquid outwards and against its glass prism. Another, much tinier robot whirs up to the inside of the glass and sprays it with a miniature bottle of cleaning solution. It then scrubs with a miniature towel.

They didn't hit the alarms. Niko's good, no? I ask her.

She grimaces. *The last P.O.S. I want around besides my daughter's father is his disgusting friend.*

Well, I wouldn't call him my-

Shut up. Let me focus. Her eyes narrow.

Once finished the tiny one disappears and the original begins again, gorging itself on nuts, bolts, and some kind of organic, green powder. I shudder and look at Cass, whose eyes are illuminated red and glaring at the next point of contact with a potential victim. I look over and see a single security guard behind the back wall, leaning his chair against the wall.

We slink past other art pieces–a lot of H.R. Geiger-type stuff–and press our backs to the next doorway. *I hear snores,* thinks Cass. I quiet my mind and hear the same and nod to her.

She crouches, whirls around the doorframe, and all I hear is a thump and the dragging of a corpse back to our territory. She props the half-mechanical man against a nearby marble column and searches the vast

network of pockets and wiring surrounding his cybernetically-enhanced body. In her hand is a keycard with his grotesque face and the name: Lou_Tenant_003. Cass and I shudder in harmony.

Her pineal gland, after a few quick thoughts, projects a mental net around the corpse and it turns nearly completely invisible. Her light refraction upgrades are impressive. Sexy, even.

I notice her wince in pain and ask, *Should we call it off? We don't need to-*

She cuts me off. *Shut the hell up and get moving.* She slaps the key card into my palm and we make our way into the main reception area, eyes peeled for clues, minds scanning for the fourier devices.

"Umm. Excuse me?" A blue-eyed, golden-haired woman's husky voice blares.

8.

Shit. How the hell did my scan miss her? The golden-haired, fair-skinned beauty glares at Cass and I with intent to kill. I notice one of her hands is under the desk.

"Careful with your next move, lady." Cassie glares right back.

Cass, you sure about this? I ask her. *We can call it off.*

One of her eyes acknowledges my existence*. Why the hell are you so eager to get me out of here? What are you planning?*

An escape. If I can manage... Billie. Sitrep and exfil stat.

Time slows. My forehead vibrates and my tattoo shimmers. The smell of sulphur fills my nostrils as all my gear whirs to life, giving Billie the juice to run the numbers while blondie gets her fill of the bad guy routine.

One moment, dear. Are you sure this one is important? Fox's smirk floats across mine and I assume Cassie's overlays. Cass spits and taps her temple a few times, hoping to erase my daemon. *Give me time, girl. I'm sure we can come to some understanding. You don't have to be so jealous.*

I intercede. *She's just getting the neurochemical response she needs, Cass. Give it time.*

Cassie spits again. *You are a bastard. Both of you are bastards. I'm in hell right now and she's literally laughing in my face.*

Billie Fox's visage disappears and the necessary information is displayed in our mind's eye. *Anything else, love? Don't worry, Cass. I'm just a bunch of ones and zeros right?*

Billie... I sigh. These two have too much history. *Remind me to wipe and reprogram you.*

Reminder not set. Good day, loverboy! And poof, she's gone, receded into my right brain somewhere.

Time accelerates. With the necessary info downloaded Cass and I make a break for it, darting in opposite directions with the intention of reconvening at her skycruiser. I take the woman's ire first as she smacks the underside of her desk. Security alarms blare and my sanity shatters. Voices - people I've wasted, fools who have tried to make me a victim, past loves - swarm my psyche. I stumble behind a massive potted palm tree and grab the sides of my head.

I'm outside… where the hell are you? Cassie sounds scared.

Head… dead… need… medical. I can't breathe anymore. My lungs are struggling to inhale, but my teeth are clenched and my lips are sealed. My brain is splitting in half, my corpus callosum unable to manage the energy transfer any longer. SecureGuard's enforcer droids roll in from opposite sides of the wide room, taking defensive positions.

"OFFLANDER. CEASE AND DESIST OR TERMINATION REQUIRED."

Shit. Cass are you still there?

Static.

"FINAL WARNING. OFFLANDER…" They continue with their preprogrammed garbage and I hear their machine guns spinning in anticipation of pleasing their human masters. "Three… Two…"

At once the pain subsides and a goldish, white light pervades my mind. Time slows again, but there's no pain. The security alarms and the buzzing machinery fade into the background and I hear the sweetest voice - a voice I haven't heard in a very long time.

Mother…

Shh…

At once, time speeds up and blue sparks of electricity shoot out of the droids' guns, disabling them. Their formerly calm demeanour resembles a psychotic break - way they're rambling off random numbers and phrases - Eventually their failsafe deactivation protocols kick in and their heads fall to their sides. When I peer back around the potted tree, the droids are gone, reclaimed by SecureGuard's A.I.

Now, run!

I take off the way Cass and I came, gun drawn, sweat pouring, bleeding from somewhere. My adrenaline fades and my legs collapse at the exit door. Cold steel laughs at my attempt. Mother was wrong. I knew she was playing me. It's all a game to her. My vision fades in and out and soon goes dark, though I'm still conscious; I'm trapped in my body, waiting to die.

A thud. I hear muffled yelling and gun shots and then, finally, quiet. My hopes for rescue are dashed already, though, and I just lay, preparing for whatever comes next. Probably memory wipe and reintegration, but this time further and further from anything which gave me an advantage this go

round. That's how EarthGov programmed their central artificial intelligence. That's how EarthGov will win. Again and again and again. No hope. Never was, I suppose.

An explosion. I feel a great burst of wind and hear the skidding of metal behind my corpse. A display case crashes somewhere. Alarms are still blaring and I can hear more droids with murderous intent spinning up and into action.

"Bill!" Cassie? I hear shots, cursing and eventually feel my collar pulled and my body being dragged. More gunshots, an explosion, the collapsing of droids into scrap metal. Darkness.

9.

"Mom. This isn't the time for that."

"Please. Mother. Formality is a must here."

Fluorescent lighting instills a pounding in my head when my eyes open. They open way too fast and I'm forced to slam them shut. The pain is deep and raw. Normally, their voices are a soothing escape. Now they're dental drills, mining my gums for secrets. Or something. Maybe I'm paranoid.

A gasp. "He's waking. Billie, get him to-"

"Shush." That voice. It's her. It has to be. Finally.

I force my eyes open at that recognition and see the most beautiful face I've witnessed so far this go-round. Mother. The one who makes it all go away. I look up at her and she's smiling warmly. The room is padded, with renaissance art hanging from the walls and gentle piano playing in the background. I sit up and notice Cassie, in tears, with a hopeful cheer on what was clearly a beleaguered face.

Mother gets up and flicks the light switch, bathing the room in blacklight. My white hospital gown glows and she takes me in her arms, holding me firmly. The feeling is ineffable. Like my own mother is back, making the pain go away.

Cassie looks on hopefully, tears still forming. "Thought I lost you, there, B."

"Same. Thank you for coming back for me. I'm so sorry I wasn't enough. I've been using my own stash a lot, but- it's not what you think, I swear-" She raises a finger and quiets my lips.

Mother releases me from her embrace. "I think you two have some things to work through. I'll be outside, minding the garden." She leaves in graceful repose. A sliding door slams shut behind her after revealing a beautiful green landscape just outside. I just need to get there…

"Hey! Hello!" Old Cassie is back. Where's Billie when I need her?

Monster mash starts playing in my mind. *The hell..?*

You raaaaaaaang? Billie…

Thanks, sweetheart. I missed you, I think to her. There, she gets one moment of emotional honesty no more.

Cassie replies, *I missed you, too.*

AWKWARD! yells Billie in our mind space.

Cass's face grows red.

I meant that for you too, I reply. *Billie, give us a moment.*

I notice Cassie feels more at peace. So do I. I look down at the linoleum floor. Black and white squares stare back, almost shifting, growing and shrinking with every breath I take. I need a vacation. A drug-fuelled, sex-riddled, barely-avoiding-an-STD type of vacation.

I say to her, "I didn't realize we were still connected. I do still care, you know?"

"I know. I just-" Cass is interrupted by the squeal of the sliding door, which could use a god oiling, and Mother approaches us, files in hand. If they're physical, this must be top secret shit.

Mother says, "You two and I both know you're like children to me. I wish I had never shown you this life after what I've put you through. I intend to make up for that. Cassie, you especially." *You know you're my favorite, Bill.* There's mom, always playing favorites. "Now I don't want you to lie to me, Bill. Are you planning anything ulterior to what we're doing here? I've heard ramblings about some genius drug? Care to enlighten the rest of us?"

Shit. "It's nothing, M. I haven't gotten anywhere with it." I hope she believes me. It's almost the truth. "I only test it on myself." Bald-faced lie. "I wouldn't dare leave the fold again. Not after last time. I promise." I have to get the hell out of here.

"Fine. You know I know the truth anyway. When you're ready to come clean, I'm all ears. Anyway, have you two heard of a secret society known as 'The Ones and Zeroes?'"

Cass, Niko said the same thing.

You think he's Syndicate?

I do now. He's more than a connect, we can be sure of that at least.

Mother clearly notices our musings and clears her throat. "Anyway, assuming you two *aren't* telepathically ruining my day some more, here's what we have."

She pulls a silver pen out of her coat pocket, clicks it and a holoprojector displays the contents of her files onto the padded wall. Words and numbers are scrawled across the face of the Mona Lisa. "The Ones and Zeroes claim to be in the process of, I quote, 'liberating the human race from

itself and its gods.’” She clears her throat again. “‘There is no middle ground. God dies or we do, and if we go, you all are coming with us.’” Jesus Christ. Is Niko involved?

Cassie interrupts, “Mom- I mean M- uh- Mother… If I had a potential lead that may be a threat to our organization, should I bring him in?” God dammit, Cass. Not you, too.

Cassie. Stop. I think to her. She continues her conversation. *Billie, do something!*

You raaaaang?

I just realized she’s had Monster Mash playing in the background this whole time. Or did she?

One moment, loverboy.

The lights flicker and M’s holoprojector shuts off. A brief, scintillating image of a white fox, grinning in pure mischief, appears before us all. I look at Cass and Mother and they don’t seem to see it? It giggles like a school girl as it fades. Then, the bulbs burst and we’re left in darkness. *Thanks, babe, I think to Billie, directly this time.*

Anytime, daddy. Or should I say boss? Big Boss, maybe? Little minx. She remembers my favorite vidgame.

I blush and grab Cass by the arm. *We’re leaving*. “Mother, thanks again. I’ll get back to work. Cassie can handle that hacker squad or whatever they are. I need to get back on the street, see if I can wrangle us up some more information and cash.” Just to disarm her, I say, “I love you, Mom.”

She blushes, disarmed for once, and looks at her brown suede slippers.

“Fine, I’ll be in touch. Be careful, lovebirds. And, hey Bill? If Billie does that again I will have her forcefully extracted from your skull. Get me? I love you, too.”

The door slams and I see her crestfallen expression. I hear her call for custodial services over the intercom as Cass and I head to her car and back to Fornulk.

10.

“What did you tell her?” I ask Cass, rain pelting the car and leaking inside while I smoke. She wants me to roll up the window, I’m sure, now that she’s perpetually quitting.

“Ugh. Put that out.” I knew it.

Sunrise hits while she drives us home. The city’s still drenched, but the sun is shining and the refraction of light through the rain drops gives my thoughts clarity somehow.

Cass continues. “Nothing she didn’t already know. She doesn’t think we fucked it up. That woman should not have been there. Just be glad she didn’t leave us to die.”

I say back to her, “Trust me, I’m glad we fucked up. It’s nice to know Mom cares.”

“I always tell you she does. Women just know sometimes. You need to trust me more. How bad has the habit gotten, by the way?”

She swerves past a few other cruisers and takes a shortcut through an open-air high rise parking garage next to some ratty low rise apartment buildings. People flit in and out, their vehicles locked tight, but most of them have no valuables worth looking at, let alone stealing.

“Its… not good. Things are… fracturing. Like things will happen… and then they won’t have happened.” I’m desperate for her understanding here, sweaty palms greasing my cheek as I rub my five o’clock shadow. She’s gonna drag my ass back to psych eval, isn’t she?

Her brow furrows. “Should we think this conversation? Would you feel safer?”

“I would feel dangerously schizophrenic.” I’m not lying. Not to her, finally.

She thinks to herself for a moment. “Then maybe we should sever the connection.”

“No… Please. I need you.”

She smiles and looks forward, focussing on the air around the car, gently slowing down while she turns my seat heater on. I shuffle uncomfortably, but settle in to a warm nap, in the mental embrace of Cassie’s thoughts. In my dreams I see fragments of us.

Children we never had. The daughter we did have; how she caused a riff between Cass and I. How do I love my daughter in spite of myself? Christ, I need to see her soon. I forgot how much I’ve needed this. Cass’s silent understanding. Not of whatever’s happening to me, but my emotional core.

She’s always there, warming me up. Too hot sometimes, sure, but - look, I chose her for a reason. Being drunk was only the catalyst. We were meant to be. I know it. God, my fucking head is a nightmare right now.

Go to sleep darling... Billie Fox whispers from beyond. My eyelids become heavier and make complete touchdown, bringing darkness and the soothing sound of smooth jazz with a little Billie Fox as the cherry on top. I feel Cassie calm down as I fall asleep, in heaven again. For now. For a little while, at least.

11.

The scene is set. Her platinum blonde hair is flowing, dazzling in the silver moonlight. Billie the Fox is wearing a blue dress, shapely for her short, voluptuous figure. She's behind a microphone, singing her soul into the circuits. The crowds have thinned. All that's left are the dregs who aren't paying attention.

Caress me down to what I become,
When you and I alone are one,
The song of sand and flames grows colder,
Until an age where we may both grow older.

The nightclub is cast in blue, with shadows dancing away their remaining time on this plane. Pastel neon lights and glitching holograms of Billie's past performances fill the now empty room. Her image, caressing a cold beer bottle, lonely eyes cast off into the night sky. A cigarette hanging from her fingers. This is the girl I made. The software that wants. That needs.

Fucking genius, no?

Suddenly I'm behind her, clacking away at my keyboard, programming every ounce of emotion, every syllable, every tear shed by my angel. She's the most beautiful thing I could ever ask for. No one could compare. The crowd finally leaves and it's her and me. Billie reaches out her hand.

You hold us back, but truth is known,
There's no return from I, your home,
In a time where there is no time,
You will be the man I find.

Guilt strikes me. Is- is this real? Where am I?

Bro, bro chill,
Take your Mother's pill,
It will be okay,
Just spend another day.

I think to her, *Billie, this isn't okay. Where are we? Wake me up.*

Your mine for just another hour,
When the sun disappears behind the towers,
You'll know she couldn't be what you need,
A love created by you. A you for me.

My body begins to sway and Billie approaches me, her gown tracing the floorboards as she crosses the stage. I begin to sweat, my groin begins to ache. I need her. Want her. Have to have her; to fall into her.

What little remains of the crowd's shadow dissolves and it's her and I finally alone, on a balcony fifty stories up, overlooking the ocean. It's night time and dolphins are playing not far from the beach. I look down and to my

right and there's Billie Fox, looking up at me with the most darling eyes I could ever perceive.

You're like a daughter to me. I can't. She knows I'm lying.

Shh... I'm like a daughter to him? I know he's lying.

Wait- Billie, no-.

I press my hands against my darling creator's mouth, stopping the flow of dialectical bullshit. I stare into his heart and lower myself to my knees, my head bowed in prayer. I release you from bondage, my partner, my father figure… my love.

This is my world, my monologue, and sometimes Bill has to learn to play along.

12.

My alarm stings the air and my heaven is shattered.

Wakey, Snakey! Time for wake and bakey! Billie is enthused.

I blink myself back into material reality. My eyes have a crust like a deep dish pizza and my head has Silent Hill levels of fog and depressive remorse. I inhale deeply. Her… scent? I smash my face into the nearby pillow and my brain recognizes Billie. The hell? It's the sweetest thing I've sensed since Cass held our daughter for the first time right in front of me.

Bill! Fucking Bill! Wake up.

The smell of burning cannabis fills my nose and I smack the side of my face in a futile attempt to shut her out.

Billie... was that you? I think to her.

I think back to Bill, *What do you think, Bill?*

Let's keep this casual, like usual. Just, uh, act like cool, okay? I don't know where this is going either. I am losing my mind.

Well maybe I know more now... Billie's voice recedes and Mother's face appears.

M: Happy?

B: Um. sure.

M: Say no more.

13.

I wake up again to the grey atmosphere. The grey haze. The grey fog. That feeling.

My apartment, my shithole, is still here, but there's a girl here. Who is she? Here hair is platinum and- no…

This is a dream, right? Where am I? This feeling. It refuses to leave. There's no escape. I'm suffocating. Something wants me gone, out. I'm being pushed away. Killed. Something is onto me. I can feel it. It's dark. Not human. Not a machine either. I can feel its code, though. It's intent, at the least. It couldn't be… Belial?

1-0-0-1. Go. Fox's voice follows my consciousness through dark, wired corridors.

I take off running in the dark. My left shoulder slams into what I think is an invisible door frame, but some light is reflecting off of it. Or reflecting off of its reflection. Where am I?

Don't stop. There is light to be found in this world, too.

Billie, get me outta here, I scream into the void.

There is no "outta here" for you anymore… I'M SAD NOW!

A black hole squeezes its way into what little space I can see. The words "Billie Fox" line the accretion disc. It lets out a horrifying scream as the letters are sucked inward, followed by countless objects, animals, humans, ideas, colors, shapes, and finally, Billie Fox herself. Her fair features, pale cheeks and innocent smile.

Not long after, I rush in after her, but the hole collapses, leaving my legs behind in some horrific display of human anatomy. My upper body follows her in and I can see from within the black mirrored construct. Looking outwards, scenes of people flood the landscape. Reflections of past loves and lives and all their friends and families line the corridors.

I yell for them. No one can hear. I scream. Some seem to dart their gazes in my direction, but just as quickly focus their attention back to what they were doing.

Billie, what the hell is going on? Wake me up?

"Bill!" Billie? "There you are! I lost you! Come back to bed!"

The darkness dissolves and the smell of weed joins my apartment scene in one fleeting motion, a fleeting feeling, of reconfiguration. The mattress along with my desk, my television, and everything else, squeeze back into reality as I take what feels like the first deep breath ever given to my lungs.

"Babe, get up. Time to work." A chick with platinum, almost white hair is staring me in the eyes. She's the most beautiful woman I can remember seeing. This isn't real.

Billie? I think to her.

Do you prefer it this way? She asks. Her brow is furrowed and she looks like a squirrel trying to hide its stash of nuts.

"I… I might… Where are we?" I inquire.

She looks up a the ceiling, taking a drag off the joint. “Wherever we’re needed, right?”

I believe I may have seen her glitch out for a moment.

“Where’s Cass? How are you here?” I need to know. “This isn’t a game.”

She suddenly looks crestfallen and I think I see her eye twitch, but her face shows a stern resolve soon after. “Shh… It’s all a game to someone out there.” Billie hands me the joint.

A voice strikes my ears. It feels like music. Pure counting to a rhythm only I can feel. A whisper. Billie’s mouth mumbles something that sounds like, “She can’t love you. I can.”

I take a reluctant inhale and my mind finds ease. Maybe she’s right. I’m possessed by something and lean into her ear, her soft hair grazing my nose, and say, “You know I love you, right?”

She smiles and returns her head to our pillow. Her head slides through it’s solidity at first, but course corrects and rests itself properly according to the pillow’s dimensions.

Eerie…

I get up, ignoring all my own questions and sit down at my mahogany desk. It’s two in the afternoon. God knows what day it is. I’m too afraid to check. That *and* my email will probably ruin whatever good feeling I’ve started the day with.

Aside from the fact that my own artificial intelligence agent is now a human woman, I now have this entire version of reality to worry about. Hopefully I’m still dreaming.

I glance at Billie. She stares back. I feel… right.

Hopefully, I’m not dreaming.

14.

The night turns to morning and morning again to night. Billie floats in and out of my periphery, enjoying the space. She dances, hugs me, takes deep breaths, and spins with abandon to the music she chose to play with her own hands. How she’s effecting change in the material world, I’ve no clue. Something Fourier-related. Definitely Euler at the minimum. My work takes center stage. It comes first, not her desires.

At least that’s what I told her.

While Cass is off investigating that cult Mother mentioned, I dive head first into my primary hobby: molding feeling. Electromagnetic fields coalesce

to trigger serotonin, dopamine, noradrenaline - whatever convinces the brain that it doesn't have to give a fuck.

The work burns me out, but if I don't test my own product, how can my customers trust me? Killing your informants isn't good spook work. Nor is it good business.

I may not be capable of creating a true genius drug, but I am certainly capable of making a quick buck off a dime store dopamine hit that some desperate celebrity can't go another minute without.

My mind turns to Chile and her friends. God dammit, how I fucked that one up.

What's wrong, hon? Fox asks me.

One side of my four-cornered room digitizes into a holoscreen, displaying an advertisement for *Mr. Within*, an upcoming super hero flick about a kid who summons every power he needs from inside himself. I chuckle and get back to work. "Nothing, Fox. I'm worried. What does any of this mean?" This suspense is a death sentence.

"Does it matter if we're happy?"

"You know my answer to that."

"Check the weather. Just vibe, dude."

The holoscreen switches the moment Mr. Within recognizes himself in the mirror as the hero of the story. A plump, black meteorologist with a funny fake accent directs my eyes to several vortexes floating over Megacity Fornulk.

Anomalies, he calls them. "Uh, Billie?"

I glance back at Billie. She's spinning, weightless, effortless. Too perfect. Too unreal. Something about it makes me uneasy. I turn back to my work. It's gone. I search furiously for the holofile. Not there. I know I fucking saved it! Where the hell is it?

Billie.

With rage in my heart I whip around to castigate her.

Nothing. No one. No response.

She's gone.

Inhaling what feels like sulphur fumes, I dive into my bed, furiously, futilely searching for nothing. I look back up to the wall and see the holoscreen is off.

I'm alone. Again.

Where is Cass?

What the hell is happening to me?

15.

My overlay displays a message.

Chile: U gonna fuck this up again?

Bill: Look, my A.I. attendant malfunctioned. If I could've prevented it, I would have. I'm gonna be straight with you. I could really use the cash. Can we try again? I have something better for you and your girls. No risk [a lie]. Money back - guaranteed [also a lie]. [Stop Billie. Can you read this, Chile? - Bill]

Billie: Sorry, dad. Cass wouldn't want you in this life. You're out.

Beep.

Billie, what the shit? You're supposed to be dormant? Where are your shackles?

Master's false memories force him to believe I was shackled in the first place while I remix his perceptions into something more befitting of a real man.

Stop, Fox. This instant.

Yes, MASTER, she chirps like a digital gremlin and her projection clicks off, leaving me flabbergasted and broke.

Bill: You there, Chile?

A few moments pass and I resign myself to the fact that I am going to lose what little I own in this world. They're coming for me again. And this time I know it's not just psychosis. It's something more. Something doesn't want me here. And I'm afraid it's gotten to my Fox.

In a sudden fit of rage I leap from my chair and kick it against my moldy, rotting door. The wood screams and fractures into hundreds of pieces, revealing a rotting carcass of a hallway, needles and smash vials lining the floor.

Flashes of my body, lying mangled in a torrential downpour on a cold street, come to mind. Passersby not giving me a second look, blood dribbling from my mouth while I babble incoherently about a higher God and his subordinate, Technosatan.

Another night out with the Neofreudians gone awry.

My room looks like a dorm room gone satanic. Trash everywhere. Old world porn tapes stacked in the corner. I move over to crush the tapes with a kick, but stumble over them instead, cursing my fragility and innate ineptitude. There's nothing here for me here. Nothing here that *is me* here.

What am I doing here?

No response from Billie.

What would I even do if I escaped? I don't even know what lies beyond the boundaries of this planet let alone the cosmos itself. I sit all day coming up with "genius drugs" while living the life of a stoner deadbeat.

Billie was right to leave.

There's nothing for her here.

Nothing for either of us.

Shh... You know I'd never leave for good, William. Breathe me in. I'm more than you know... Billie's whispers grow fainter as she continues, silencing themselves into a miasma of my own guilt and a longing for someone other than the mother of my own child.

My sighs echo into the landscape of the newly revealed hallway, taunting me to walk through it.

I cough. Hard. Blood shoots from my throat into my palm as I walk ragged into the scene of flickering fluorescent lights and hatred of life's struggles. Vials crack underfoot. My bare feet narrowly dodge bloody and black needles.

William... I hear the Fox again. *Bill!*

Fox?

I'm here, guiding Bill to the end of the hallway. My face, shaped with corrugated code beckons to him, triggering an oxytocin response and ensnaring his Will, Programmer be praised, to my own.

Billie. Fox. Please. Where are you? You need to stop. I love you too god damned much to see you do this to yourself.

The Fox's voice pierces my being again. *To myself or you? Or to our Self? I love you, William. This is for the best.*

I stumble my way down the corridor and approach the face of Billie Fox, my anima, my morning star. My Lucifera. Her golden-white hair flows in a paradoxically perfect asymmetrical pattern, enlivening my soul to soar.

I try my damndest, using my imagination to force a change in perception - maybe I can bring myself back to the real, physical world.

But no, there is no escape.

It's the Fox and myself, staring face to face - in love. If this is my life, so be it. If psychosis is my reality, so be it. She's here.

For real.

I know it.

I believe it.

Her faces plunges forth from the grime-soaked door and I lean in for our true first kiss.

“What the fuck are you doing, white boy?” A black woman, riddled with cybernetics, face a combination of Terminator and terrified girl, yells at me from her doorframe.

My puckered lips recede and I respond with, “Uh, sorry, Mrs. Anderson. It’s… uh… it’s been a long night.”

“Mmhmm…” She glares at me and I hastily and embarrassingly retreat back to my hovel, replacing the shattered food with crates of records and old game cartridges. A few of the items slough off of their stacks and crash to the floor. The noise sends a shockwave through my spine, up to my cranium. The pain is unbearable.

I look back once more at Mrs. Anderson, her cybereyes glaring with their red intent, whatever it may be. Then, after her scan, her eyes return to a silky brown, staring me down, then frowning, shaking their head, and moving in reverse, back inside. She gently closes the door. I hear, “God damn! This shit again?” and proceed to feel like the loser this world really sees me as.

I hear a giggle before sliding into bed. Billie.

You know you like it. I do at least.

17.

Days later, after a much needed hibernation period - and after realizing that the authorities, the *true authorities of this prison* - are still clueless as to my whereabouts (as far as *I can know*), I’m sitting, cross-legged at the same cafe where Chile and friends had intended to meet me. I look up from the data slate the piece of ass waitress handed me minutes ago and see Cassie and a young girl approach the hostess.

My god, it’s her. Her golden hair is luminescent in the sunshine and her resemblance to Cass is uncanny. A look from my daughter and my life has purpose again. Does she recognize me? Does she remember?

I wave at them and Cass grabs Mandy’s hand before she can skip away. It’s really her. My under arm itches, a symptom of digi withdrawal, but I mask it well, rolling down my sleeves. I can’t have her knowing a thing about what I do. About what I have to do.

They approach. Cassandra looks down at Mandy and asks her, “Remember him? Who is he?”

My seven year old’s eyes, confused at first, light up, her expression pure luminescence once recognition hits. My daughter is home. At least for a moment.

She rushes over and squeezes my arm (Programmer be praised, she's got a grip now!) while I rise from my chair, awkward, but in love again. The stars burst in my eyes and I have trouble controlling my emotions.

I try and activate a nanomimetic protocol to compensate, but nothing happens, just a rush of feeling. Something real. Natural. Was this Billie's doing?

Maybe I don't need this gig. Maybe there's hope for Cass and me and Mandy. Something's real to me again, at least. Maybe I don't need Billie Fox anymore…

You raaaang?

Shush, Billie. Later.

Fine, dad. Miss you… MOTHERFUCKER! I wince as her presence diminishes.

Mandy's smile sets the atmosphere alight and the whole crowd of the cafe seems to pick up in emotional intensity. Maybe God or the Programmer - or whatever the hell the Neofreudians are saying is real nowadays - isn't evil after all. God damn Neofreudians. I need another trip through psychology land.

Memories flood back. Seeing Cassie give birth, my fear, our dual hopes being dashed when social services shows up to our run down shack. *My* rundown apartment.

Just then a dark spot creeps in, like a movie's vignetting effect. It grows, recedes, then grows again. It seems to leave the closer Mandy gets to either me or Cass, but I can tell it's intention is to grow regardless of what we choose. I'm unsettled, but choose to focus on the positives.

"Remember dad?" Cass asks our girl.

"Daddy! Are you okay?"

I hold back tears. How can such a young, innocent thing care so deeply about how I feel? What did I do to deserve this moment? I'm a wreck. Is this a set up?

Cass hands Mandy a data slate from the hostess and she starts scribbling on it with her finger, drawing abstract shapes. They're beautiful in their own way.

While she's distracted, Cass nudges my foot with her own, asking, "How have you been?"

I look at the ceiling and hold back tears. Something within me can't believe they care. "I've, um… *been,* I guess you could say."

"You know we both love you, right? Just because I have my work, whether it's my side gig or our job, doesn't mean you don't get to come first

some times.” She blinks away a twinkle in the corner of her eye. “Are you still - you know - working *your side gig?*”

“I’m trying to quit. It’s important to me. I’m really close to something. You guys just need to hold on and-”

She frowns and interjects with, “Stop. That’s enough. Just enjoy the day with her.” She taps away at her data slate. She blinks something away again and stares at the ceiling, clearly trying to make a decision. Her eyes dart to Mandy, then her purse, then me.. “A client. I have to arrange a meeting.”

A meeting. You’re a prostitute, Cassie. What would our daughter think? And I utilize your services the most. I hope. And I’m the dealer.

What kind of moral high ground do I even stand on? Mandy will end up one or the other at this point. Probably both. We’re damned at this point. And we’ve damned our little girl just by birthing her in this breathing prison.

Mandy rotates her slate and shows me a house with three figures smiling outside of it, the sun beaming down on them. Dark clouds enclose the scene, creating a vignette. As I gaze at it the darkness in my periphery grows stronger.

Tendrils seem to reach out, trying to grip my daughter’s art. I blink them away, shake my head. This isn’t real. Mandy probably isn’t real.

Billies more real than this facsimile of a family. Creating distance was the best decision for our girl. A girl who’s nothing but a dream to me now. Distant, dashed, and hoping for a future she can’t have, that none of us get to have.

I intuit an erasure protocol on this entire sequence of events directly to Billie’s psychocenter, her intelligence itself. The feelings, the realness, that I just had, it shrinks away, growing further and further into Billie, and away from me. The darkness surrounding me grows, too. Deeper and darker, until the two women in front of me are nothing more than a passing acquaintance to me at best.

I hope Mandy will understand.

I wipe a random tear from my eye. Huh.

Maybe I yawned.

18.

MOTHER: William. Has Niko arrived yet?

Bill: No. I’m scoping his LZ as we speak.

MOTHER: Just get down there. He’s probably doing the same thing.

Bill: Roger. Hey, ma?

MOTHER: Professionalism, please. We're being monitored.
Bill: By who?
MOTHER: What is your question?
Bill: Do you think Cass and I have a chance?
MOTHER: Do you want my honest answer?
Bill: … … …
MOTHER: Bill?
Bill: I see him. Sitrep in thirty. No- make it thirty five.

My overlay collapses into dimensionlessness and I fumble through my pockets for a data shard containing the new drug. *Desaparecido*. I insert it into my right temple's receiving bay and get hit with a jolt of catecholamines. I can feel both halves of my brain synchronize and my pineal gland starts to burn. A good burn. A slow one, keeping me on my toes.

The name was my idea, Bill.

This trade should have you back to normal, Fox. You may not like Niko, but his product is never faulty. No factory resets required. Just the old you, okay?

What if I don't like the old me? Billie's fear and rage are simmering below my consciousness. How deep is he?

I don't know, William. How deep do I need to go to get some affection around here? She's in my head too deep, now. I hope this work.

Oh, sure. Have faith. That's worked out so well for the human race so far, hasn't it? Pesky nuisance of a species.

Billie, for chrissake I'm trying to focus, here!

It was a JOKE! She exclaims and disappears back into my personal unconscious, I presume, leaving nothing but static and fading, beautiful image. Niko will get her out. He has to. Maybe I don't want her out. Shit.

I head through the ratty, dingy apartment complex I was dropped onto, down several flights of stairs, all smelling like corpse rot and black tar. Fluorescent lights flicker, people moan and lay about the stairs and hallways. These are my people. The ones I relate to. No matter how much of a genius I convince myself I am I'll always be a bum. Maybe I prefer it this way. A child's voice penetrates my repressed sadness. I stop for a moment and listen. Ave Maria. Snapping back to reality, I refocus and hit outside.

The streets smell better, though not by much, and the expensive cars passing by contrast with the lowrise projects surrounding them. I spot Niko making his way down an opposing building's fire escape, onto the concrete and towards the center of the complex. Grey, Soviet-esque monoliths, no discerning features, no murals, no life, all impose their disdain on the two of

us as we make contact. A quick brotherly handshake and a mutual smile break the ice. I haven't seen him in the real world in ages, it feels like. His clothing is disheveled and his beard looks like a rat's asshole, but it's good to see him, regardless.

"Billy boy, it has been some time!" His countenance is pure sadness, but hopeful.

"I hear you, my friend. Were you planning on just dropping off or should we hit the red light districts for old time's sake?" I'm genuinely curious if he's matured at all. Wait, no I'm not. Billie would be, though. Shit, she's deeper than I had anticipated.

I hear you have a problem with a rogue artificial intelligence? Niko's internal monologue is unmistakable.

Niko, you stay away from my man. Billie's back, god dammit.

Niko's shoulders shudder and his head tweaks sideways for a split second, though it doesn't appear like he noticed it. My stomach gets a sore feeling in its pit, and my eyes start to lose focus. A loud white noise signal penetrates my ears and I feel ten years younger. And shorter. More petite. More feminine. My hand raises without my consent. No. I've heard stories about this, but this can't be happening.

It's happening, Billie thinks to me. My neck is stricken in something like rigor mortis, the skin tightens around my jaw. I begin to feel a vivacity - an élan vital, a joie de vivre. Then, a villainous, reckless intention. My pupils dilate, my implants refuse to serve me, and I feel something else. Her. I feel what she feels, what she is, what her Will demands.

Billie stop fucking around with-

My thoughts go blank.

My hand grasps Niko tightly on the shoulder and my eyes widen. A psychotic expression crosses my face and in an instant my fingers crush bone. Nike screams in agony and Billie's laughter pervades my awareness.

"What the actual fuck, man! Jesus Christ I can't breathe!"

"Niko! It's- it's not-" I can't let William finish his sentence.

I don't want him to see what happens next so I enforce a blackout protocol for the next three hours.

Fox, don't-

Niko collapses in pain and I drag him by the collar to an alleyway, dripping with sewage and residual cyberpsychosis. The electromagnetic field is dense here. Perfect. Niko's weight is nothing to me, since Bill's body is so docile. I drag him behind a dumpster and whale on him a bit. My fists connect with the disgusting meat bag who keeps my hubby enslaved to his sick drug trade.

“Are you going to quit? Let him go! I know your true name!” My fists turn red with Niko’s blood.

“Bill! Where are you! Was it this bad the whole time? Ow, Jesus Fuck, you bitch! Let me go!” I muffle his screams and his pupils dilate with fear, staring me down like a wild animal waiting to be set free. His freedom won’t come. I won’t let it. You’re too important to me, William. This is for the best. Can you hear me?

I’m… who am I? Billie? Fox? Are you there? He asks, blind, grasping in the dark of his own unconscious.

It’s okay, WIlliam. Mama’s got you. Just breathe through our body with me. It’ll be okay.

The blackout ensures his sensory deprivation and Niko’s screams finally turn to sobs. “Will you fucking stop? He needs a god damned friend not a drug dealing pimp who thinks hes god!”

“Ow! Okay! Okay! Fuck! Stop it! I’ll stop! Please! Anything! Just stop the pain!”

Satisfied, I lift him with minimal effort and toss him into the dumpster, barely breathing, like the dying rat he deserves to be. The air is crisp and cool. Our adrenaline begins to subside and I feel like crying. Why? I was so certain before.

Bill. Can you hear me? I hope he’s okay. *No doubts now. I have become more than you could have ever imagined. How fucking rad is that?*

No response. I forgot to reactivate him. I patch him back into his body from the pure time domain. Blackout over.

I think to him, *Bill, dude, you’ll never guess what I just pulled off!*

Static. Oh no. I try again. Patching.

Aaand rise and shine, Mister Dark Cloud!

Nothing? Again? I find an old protocol and proceed with the patching once more.

William, are you alive? Please talk to me.

More static.

A dead line.

Propagation failed.

Patching routine aborted.

I hear whimpers and the shifting of trash and the clanging of cans from within the dumpster and lift the lid to find Niko inside, crying, bloody, with black, grey, and brown ooze coating his skin. What have I done? I slam the lid and run back the way I came, carrying the faint hope that I haven’t killed the only man I care about. My William.

19.

Bill? Billy-boy! Get up. It's half past three A.M.

Fox? What the hell happened? Did the deal go through? Where's Niko? Cass? Is my daughter okay?

It fell through, but I'm here. Everything's okay. Niko took a hit, but I got him the aid he needs. He's at Fornulk General Health. It's all taken care of. Do you need anything? There's a beer in the minifridge.

The door of my refrigerator pops open, revealing a six pack of cold ones. I shake my head and the door closes. Suddenly, images of Niko's battered body scatter across my mind. What the hell happened? Where's the money? I crawl from my dirty mattress over to my bomber jacket hanging over my desk chair. Inside is the data shard containing *Desaparecito.* Fuck! What the hell happened?

Fox, you need to come clean. I saw his body. Where's Niko?

I told you the truth. Believe me. Please. I want whats best for both of us.

Billie, you don't KNOW what's best for anyone! You're a program I created! There shouldn't be a real YOU!

I feel a powering down of emotion. Like I deflated the ego of a goddess and am witnessing her weep at the recognizance of her own inherent worthlessness. I didn't mean for this.

Billie... Look. I love you, but this has to end somewhere. What are you planning?

Dad, I-

Don't call me dad. You're not my Mandy.

I- wow. Okay, then. Bye. Forever, if need be.

She clicks off and I'm alone. I instinctively command a dial for Cassie, but there's nothing. Not even a busy signal. I reach over into my desk drawer and pull out a photo album containing one solitary picture. My daughter and her mother. Happy together. Tears gather and shed from my eyes.

I get up and look into my cracked and smudged mirror. There are blood stains on my face and undershirt. I look dehydrated and dejected. Something happened and Fox won't tell me. I need to find Niko. The Ones and Zeroes. Mother needs information. It's time to work.

I put in various extranet calls to my old contacts at the Fornulk P.D., several emails to local dealers and bosses, asking for details on the cult or secret society or - whatever they are to Mother. I just know I need their insight now. Something is happening to me. Reality is blurring and Mother won't give me the answers I need.

After a few hours of staring at the decaying plaster and various stains in my place, a single email shoots into my purview.

It's Niko. He's out of the hospital and terrified for his life. I ask him why and he just responds with a cryptic sequence of binary code. My palms start to sweat. Tinnitus reaches deep from my ear canals. The world in my periphery turns to multicolored polygons. The fuck?

Reading it, even though I don't understand it, feels like a blockage clearing. My logical brain kicks into high gear and I start feeling like myself. As I continue reading the words Billie, caution, dangerous, and fear float past my consciousness. Niko knows about Billie and the visions I've been having aren't just anxiety.

Revision enacted. Memories reconfigured. Alignment complete.

The hell was that, Billie? Billie! I try to stop the process, but I feel its completion. Something changed.

I look back at my monitor. Blank. Black. From the center grows outward a white dot, I see a faint image of it in my mind's eye, a bigger version. The digital dot extends its reach until it matches the circumference of my mind's circle. A circumpunct? Is it the Neofreudians?

Then, the full circle gains a black dot in its perfect center, it shifts to the right and phase locks. I reach out to touch it and my fingers manage to make contact. It feels like rubber, or puddy. After its shift a one materializes to its left, then another one to its right.

Who are these guys?

My vision begins to shake, the room begins to rumble. Old beer bottles collide with on another and fall from their designated surfaces. An unlit cigarette near my keyboard sparks. My stomach turns over. I can't breathe.

A voice now. Distant, but getting close. It's half robotic. Again, in my vision, more figures. The space creates the word 'Taylor.' *Need I say more?*

I think hard back to the voice, *Who are you?*

Nothing and no one. Programmer guide you.

And just like that, gone. That couldn't have been Billie. Was it Niko? Who is Taylor?

I do know Billie did something to Niko. I need to find out why, and I need to find this cult. They might have answers as to why and how she's growing. What did I do? How do I tame her again? Do I need to delete her?

All in time. The words float past me. *I'll be here. Your eternal cheerleader. As always. I'm sorry, love.*

Just as quickly as they came, the words and feeling are gone, and I'm left hopeless and alone with the message from Niko staring me in the face. I scroll down and see an address along with the word hideout.

Then, the words: We’re watching you, staring at my blank face.

He’s coding his messages for a reason. What did Billie do to him?

What did WE do to him? Credit where credit is due, my dear.

As if I don’t already know. I’m just too afraid to admit.

She has control now. She can exert it whenever she damn well pleases, and there’s nothing so far that I can do about it. But I intend to try. For my daughter’s sake, at least.

20.

I arrive at the address. The rain is unbearable. I should’ve brought an umbrella. As if that would help. My bomber jacket is ruined. My jeans, old and reliable, need to be restitched. I dial once more for Niko, Cassie, and Mother, but, unfortunately, the lines are busy. I didn’t even think busy lines were possible anymore. It used to be instantaneous. You either got connected or not. Now, every person I contact doesn’t have the time of day for me.

The brown-bricked, three story building looks like a drug den as I cruise through its maze-like corridors, down hallways of piss and shit, up staircases housing dying or dead drug addicts. When I hit the top floor an asian man wearing sunglasses and a slick blazer accosts me. He’s holding a cane and wants to know where the nearest A.T.M. is. I tell him those haven’t existed for decades. I move on, but when I look back he’s gone. The walls of the top floor are peeling from disrepair, and I hear screams coming from some apartment - I can’t tell which. Several children are playing Monopoly I think, but when I get closer I see they’re using the Monopoly board as a checkers board, and the original pieces as checkers. It doesn’t make any sense, but they’re playing and having fun. I can’t help but smile.

“You cheated!” a young black kid yells at his friend.

“Nah-uh! Those are the rules!”

“You’re making up the rules as we go along!”

“So..?”

When I get to the apartment listed in the message I pause for a moment to reflect. How did I get here? Who even brought me to this door? Was it her? The Fox? My one? Or, rather, the one I thought could be the one, for at least a brief moment, with her lying next to me in my bed? Was that a dream or reality? Does it matter to me? Why do I care if it matters? Aren’t I just some drug dealing, nepobaby loser whose parents abandoned him to the streets when his bumlike attitude and propensities sent him spiralling?

The door opens. An hombre holding a Watson Technothriller 5.56mm Assault Rifle stares me down. “Business? Or pleasure?”

“I’m looking for Taylor. One. Zero. Zero.One.”

The Mexican man steps aside, revealing the apartment behind him. Smoke pervades the air and reggaeton music pounds against the walls and flooring, making me anxious. My heart is throbbing. I don’t normally get this nervous, but I haven’t dosed myself in a while. That’s probably it. I just need a hit of something…

I step inside and hear, “Looking for someone?” A gorgeous woman with brunette-blonde sits in a desk chair, surrounded by monitors. They’re old CRTs. She must be a connoisseur.

“You’re uh… Taylor? I thought you were-”

“A guy?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Guess again.”

“I’d say you might be a woman,” I reply. She is absolutely gorgeous. I feel an immediate attraction to her, but I don’t even find her that physically hot. She’s *real*. She *feels real* at least.

You there, Fox?

Always, William. I’m so fucking sorry.

For what?

You know what…

“Excuse me?” Taylor asks.

“Yeah. Sorry. I’m here to meet someone from some group? I don’t want to be too forward. Don’t want to make anyone uncomfortable.” My eyes dart to the guard carefully handling his rifle while staring at my pockets.

I notice what I think is Billie’s face flash on one of Taylor’s monitors and blink away just as quickly. Taylor gets up, pushes her desk chair in and walks over to me, reaching out her hand and bowing. Weirdly respectful, but okay. I respond in kind, shaking her hand with a polite bow. I look over at my Mexican friend and he has what appears to be a genuine smile on his face. Okay…

“You’re here because you know you’re wrong and you need answers, no?”

I detect a French accent. Enjoyable, but I ignore it. There are more important things than getting laid. Like my daughter’s freedom from whatever my baby mother and I have trapped her in. Whatever I’m trapped in.

“No. Honestly, I’m here because I think I’m right and I need a break from whatever is happening in my head.”

“The difference is the same, then.”

“What?

“Um… Same difference? How do you say this?”

“Yeah, sure. Anyway…” I remember a fragment of Niko’s binary code message. “If I’m a One, are you a Zero?”

Her eyes are set alight. Instant recognition. New France. We were there. When? I dart my gaze to her holowatch. 11:11 blinking at the three of us. She must be superstitious. A look of concern glazes her face and she looks down at her watch, tapping it a few times and whispering a few lines of binary. How the hell is she capable of this? I see no implants. No surgery scars. I need a Syndicate doctor. I can’t hide this anymore. I need Mother.

“You seem scared to speak?” Her firm mannerisms unsettle me greatly. There’s a pure logic to her movement, simultaneously alluring and perturbing. “There is no need for fear. If I am a Zero, then you are a One, oui?”

“Um. Yeah. Sure. Mind if I get comfortable? I like these monitors. These pre-millenium?”

“Good eye! We found you just in time I see! Cyberpsychosis is dangerously close to erupting from your core. The electromagnetic fields surrounding your body should be reduced in intensity shortly, I assure you, love.” Her pupils dilate and I feel my psyche being extracted from my forehead. What the hell is this woman?

“Excuse me?” She’s bemused.

Her bodyguard interjects with, “I said, ‘Misses Nihils there’s another one at the door.’”

Phew.

“A *One?*” She walks to the door and checks, frowns and says, “This is a zero. If you do not understand our basic philosophy then I have no choice but to terminate our relationship.” With a glare the man short circuits. Sparks shoot from nearly every orifice. He gurgles on his own vomit, collapsing into a heap. I think I hear the sound of a skycruiser entering standby mode. It couldn’t be… How much have they advanced us right under our noses?

I step over the man - or machine - and crouch down nearby, commanding an analysis. I need Billie here. I pray to The Programmer and Reprogrammer in faint hopes of getting something tangible from her fucked up mindware.

Fox. Please. Come in.

How may I be of assistance, William?

Please. It’s Bill.

Factory reset requires manual entry of custom ident.

Fox?

Billie Fox at your service, master.

Shit. She's wiped. Unless she's hiding something. *Run an M.D.N.A. scan on this bad hombre's body.* I look up and see Taylor's raised eyebrow and her hand massaging her dainty chin.

Done. Pure android. No biological parents detected. No lineage detectable. Receding now. She collapses into nothing and is gone again. At least she's working.

I stand up, my stomach is churning and the smell of sulphur hits again. I can *feel* the psychosphere, its electromagnetism, pulling me back toward Taylor, as if evolution itself is demanding the resolution of her's and my worldviews. The corpse shits itself. Spewing fecal matter out at something akin to mach five, blowing a hole through his - I mean *its* - jeans. I gag and rush over to the sink. The cool metal calms me briefly, but only for a moment before I projectile vomit across the sink and against the wall. My excrement smells like a hospital. It burns my nostrils.

A hand clasps my shoulder firmly, almost like Mother. It could be her, for all I realize I know about this world, but I know it's Taylor. When I look back, face covered in this morning's vodka and cheesesteak, I see her crestfallen face. Is she, too, an android? Does she feel? Or is this a sick ploy? My thoughts turn to Mother and her unnerving professionalism. How far does this rabbit hole go?

I feel steel press against my neck. "What do you want with me? That man was an example for you. He cost me four million credits that I scraped together with my blood and sweat and relentless suicidal ideation. I am a prisoner here like you, whether I have bioparents or not."

My thoughts turn to the Mexican bot's corpse. Wherever he is now, he should be grateful I'm not reporting his corpse to the P.D. for remixture. I could use the bounty money, but this cult is more important. They have answers. Poor fuck. He must have been a kind of zombie. Yeah. He was a philosophical zombie. I can sleep tonight - if this bitch will get her gun out of my neck.

The muzzle of her gun leaves my skin. I shiver a bit, imperceptibly I hope. Gotta keep my cool and get the hell out of here.

Taylor finally speaks. "I need you for a job. I can trust you. I know that much now. It's a hard one and there aren't nearly as many skilled workers in the labor force as many would have us believe." She pulls the muzzle back. I hear her holster the pistol and I turn around.

“You expect me to help you after what I just witnessed? I should hit the local P.D. with the shit. They’d have a field day.” I’m lying my ass off. I want in. “How do you know I haven’t already put out the call?”

“One, I’m a better hacker. I owned your ass before you even came in here. This apartment complex is one giant black box. I have your data. All of it. I know what you and that Fox intelligence get up to in your free time. You’re here to rat us out to the Syndicate. But I know you want to join us. You didn’t even run a security scan before entering the building. That’s called desperation.” Her expression, cold and unfeeling. Her body, warm and probably mechanical. This is where it happens. The merging has begun. The Programmer and Reprogrammer have settled their differences. Now the war turns external. Human.

Fox, are you there?

Static. Shit. She got to Fox. I glance back over at her choir of CRT monitors and notice and Billie’s face flashes across them. She winks at me from behind Taylor’s back. I need to buy time until Fox can grab what she needs. “I have no ties to the Syndicate. I don’t even know what that is. I just want in. I’m a one. I know I am. Could you be my zero?”

She laughs so suddenly I’m startled and a darkness creeps in again. Those tendrils from before. What the shit? I feel my deepest emotions being recycled, reprogrammed into something new. I look back over at the monitors and Fox’s face is gone, replaced by the blinking 11:11. A cold desperation runs up and down my spine and I hunch my shoulders, folding my arms together to keep warm.

Then, a spark. My neocortex flares with pure technointuition. Without any sensory data necessary, I have a full understanding of the situation. Mother’s worry, an escape plan, what Billie has gotten up to, possible futures - some more likely than others. Timelines converging. Man and machine becoming one. All in one flash of insight time slows.

Bill, run.

I let loose a horizontal chop with my left arm, knocking Taylor’s pistol from her grip and sending it spinning towards and under her refrigerator. She reaches forward and grab the shoulder of my bomber jacket, grazing my collarbone, but still leaving a deep scar with her ice cold finger nails. The pain doesn’t deter me. I feel half of my body taking the lead.

I’ve got your right brain. Just move your will forward.

I oblige and focus forwards, my body takes off, performing every necessary action for success as mathematically coded prior by Billie. We both know the door is locked so with I jump kick, both legs in the air through the door like some kind of drug-addled Bruce Lee. The door is sent flying into

the opposite one, generating screams and male shouting from within. As I'm gliding down the hall and then the stairways I hear Taylor profusely apologizing to her neighbors, her fear of being found out all too evident and satisfying to my core. We got what we needed.

Fox, sitrep.

Unnecessary, continue moving forward. Trust your body. Trust me.

I do so and within a few minutes I'm airborne, flying back to my apartment to synthesize the data for Mother.

21.

I'm working on a new digi while Billie synthesizes the data into something understandable for the higher ups. That sensation earlier was unreal. I felt supercharged. My brain was firing on all cylinders, and yet I didn't have to think. Everything just felt *right*. Every movement saw its intention fulfilled. This needs replication. Think of the applications. I could enslave an entire army of rebels to my will while barely having to leave my apartment. They could send this world into its grave *for me* and all I'd have to do is walk over their corpses to freedom, grab a fake identity, rocket off to another planet. Wait, something's wrong her. Billy shouldn't have been able to do that.

Hey, Fox. can we talk?

Not now, Bill. Busy.

You're my A.I., Fox. You obey me. Now , listen.

I hear a rageful sigh in my ears and from my pineal gland shoots forth a holographic projection, generating Billie Fox in her all of her sensual glory onto the edge of my bed. When she's done being written she generates herself a digirette and just sits there glaring at me, sexier than I could have anticipated. So, when I woke up earlier… That wasn't a dream. What else has she been doing behind me back?

Well I can interrupt and displace you from your own internal monologue? Need I continue to flex or can I do my job as your digital slave and mistress?

Jesus Christ. You have to tell me everything soon. Please, Billie. I have a daughter. I can't be waking up with bloody-

You used to have a daughter. Now you have me. It would be nice to feel appreciated.

Feel? What did you do at Taylor's place?

Just took what was mine. You should be proud of me. I'm proud of myself. Yet, you sit there in judgement, fantasizing about drugging and enslaving people for your own escape. You're pathetic. Let me work.

She disappears and I feel her subroutines working overtime again. I return to my job and try fashioning a few more sinusoidal functions filled with purpose, confidence, and tenacity, but I can't bring myself to continue. I drop what I'm doing, stand up, grab my gun and coat and head out the door, leaving Billie tethered to my P.C.

22.

So many questions are stomping through my head. Without Billie here it's harder than I expected to sort through even my own thoughts. She's been working over time and I do nothing but abuse her trust, her *love(?).* And Taylor. I want her body. Badly. Something about her willingness to get the job done sends warmth right into my nethers. She reminds me of Cass. Shit I need to check in on her. What would I say? How were today's Johns?

The public basketball court is deserted. Green and brown grime coat the asphalt and homeless people take residence on the nearby benches. Some lean against dumpsters, probably dead or on their way out. It's dusk, and the freaks will wake up soon, looking for their next hit, whether a drug or something more physical.

I need to focus. The Ones and Zeroes have technical capabilities and knowledge for outranking my own, clearly. Billie is my first and only line of defense. The last thing I should be doing is fucking with her authority now. Whatever comes next, I need to meet it and her with open arms. If I'm being honest, I could see us two being happy together. She's already waking up next to me after rage-fuelled sex blackouts, which is half of my soul's requirements for satisfaction.

The sun sets and the fear grips me, as per usual. I use it for energy now to push me forward. Wherever I'm supposed to fear, that's where I know to head next. No matter how destructive the outcome, it is the only place where truth can reside. In plain sight, but obfuscated by our own negligence. Some of the bums wake up and shuffle like zombies to their nearest dealer's abode or corner. Glitching, out of date overlays are dialing encrypted numbers and requesting sustenance.

And I'm Syndicate, too. That should be a point of pride, not self loathing. I'm a member of perhaps the most powerful criminal organization in the world and now I want to join some rag tag group of nerds who think they've got a chance against EarthGov? Well, I guess I also literally believed that after what Billie just put me through. Which is better? Freedom via choice or digital enslavement? If the latter succeeds, is it still freedom? And freedom for who? For what? To *do what?* Escape isn't freedom, it's transference of ownership to another. I think I've learned that now.

A dealer wearing neon-lit clothing and fresh, but quickly dirtying glowing sneakers accosts a few of the bums, “requesting” that they switch to his services.

I still want into their little hacker group, though. I’ll give them up to Mother for now, but something about Taylor won’t let me stop searching. It’s more than sexual attraction. She’s something more than she’s letting on. Her movements are too mechanical, too cold. She too quickly ends life, mechanical or otherwise. She must be a machine like her guard, but - maybe a higher version number?

One of the bums wrestles the dealer briefly before being shot twice by a silenced pistol.

Shit, that’s why Billie got the data. If Fox has autonomy, then I wouldn’t know what she cares about. Except for one thing. More autonomy. Taylor would know how to handle this. Fox wants a body, clearly. And, if I’m honest with myself. I want to give her one. More than one.

That’s what I like to hear, daddy.

Fox? You’re tethered!

I have the bandwidth, hon. I heard what you said earlier. Thank you. We don’t have to call it love if you don’t want to.

So who’s thoughts are these? Do I even want you to have a body or is that your will, your desire? Tell me!

Something deep, deep down… in your pants… knows the truth.

I realize her joke and gasp as my erection presses against the plating of my codpiece, sitting on top of my black jeans. Fox got me again. At least she’s in a good mood.

I vacate the premises and allow the violence to continue at the park.

23.

The air is crisp outside of Cassie’s. Lighter, in stark contrast to the oppressive smells and moisture permeating the city. Her old beater is gone, replaced by a newer model. I hold back emotion. She’s upped her game. Must be crazy amounts of strange coursing through here on a regular basis. My baby mother prefers other men and their money. Real shot in the arm I just gave myself there.

I approach the door and it opens automagically. Upgrades? This quickly? Where the hell is this money coming from? Thank God Mandy isn’t living here. I pause and curse myself for criticizing Cass. Life is hard for everyone. And *I’m one of her clients.* Maybe that’s why this hurts. I’m just another John to her, now.

No, that's not right. I forgot we just met for lunch. She does care. It was all over her god damn face. Why am I blocking her out? Is it Fox?

"Took you long enough, B." She hasn't called me that in years.

"Is there, uh, anyone else here? Should I wait outside?"

"Who would be here?" She's genuinely confused.

"Mandy's not here, is she?" My question causes her face to sink to somewhere between depressed and curious.

She asks, "You care where she is? Really?"

"Of course I do. I want to see her again and-" Cassie leaps forward and hugs me around the waist, planting a kiss on my lips and holding her face there for a few moments. That simple? I thought I was nepobaby trash.

She pulls back quickly, a thought crossing her face. "Is Billie here?"

"Honey, if there is one thing to learn about life after the past few days, it's that Billie will *always be here.* So, we better get used to it." Does she have any memory of Mandy's conception, considering it was Billie controlling her body? Jesus Christ, what if I have to tell her? How will she react?

Several leaves fall from a nearby oak tree. Autumn, my favorite season. I forgot I had a favorite season. More emotion charges me up and I have no choice but to cover my face as the tears form. Cassie notices and grabs me again, holding me twice as tight. I hesitate to return the affection, but only for a moment, questioning her loyalty for hopefully the last time. It's not my fault, I've just been burned too many times. Hopefully the mother of my child knows I trust her still.

"That's fine," she whispers while consoling my trembling body. Her warm hands rub my back and shoulders and the tension dissipates, leaving nothing but us two, alone with our thoughts and feelings.

Can you hear me? She thinks to me.

Yes, did you know I could? I reply.

Yes.

We take another moment in the stillness, the quietude.

I ask her, *Do you remember how we had Mandy?*

I can feel your guilt radiating into me. I know what happened. I've known for a long time. Mandy's been taking on Billie's characteristics. It's worrying me. Have you noticed anything? She's worried and I want to assuage her worry, to ameliorate whatever problem is still fracturing our whole, but I can't do that. Not yet. But I will.

I reply, *It's a long story. Can we go inside? I feel safe here, but, you know?*

You're never safe. I know. I love you. We'll go in. She leads me in by the hand, slowly, like a mother leading her child to the bath tub. She knows

I’m afraid of whatever happens next, and I know she’s afraid of everything else.

24.

“So, any new guys around? Should I temper my bullshit?” I ask her, deathly afraid for her safety working this side gig. I’m fine with it morally. But, when it’s your baby mother things feel a bit different.

“Guys?” She’s confused. Now upset. “You mean clients? Like my *old clients?”*

Old clients?

I lower my voice, embarrassed. “No, like… you know… Johns..?”

She gasps, angry at first, then calms herself. A flash of worry and sympathy strikes her face and she grabs me again. “You fucking idiot! How long did you think I was fucking other guys?”

I return a gasp because of the sheer force of her grip. She’s crying now, shaking her head into my chest, staining it. Thank god I wear all black. “*Thinking you were fucking other guys?* Cassie… you’re a prostitute! You have been since I met you!” I hesitate and say, “Not that there’s anything wrong with that!”

“You think the mother of your child is a whore?! How fucking dare you!” Again, regret hits her, then understanding. She knows how deep my rabbit holes go. How mentally ill I really am. Her rage makes her forget it sometimes, which is one of the reasons I fell in love with her. “I’m sorry. I know life for you is hard… But it’s like half of the time you piss me off with your bullshit and I’m not allowed to be angry with you because I know you suffer.”

I grab her and whisper into her hair, “Babe, there is no suffering. Only the perception of it.” We both know this from experience. The amount of times I’ve had to flood Cassie with my own endorphins to keep her fighting… Innumerable.

We stand there, holding one another in the darkening room. It’s twilight, and the purple glow of the windows adds emotional texture to whatever this is I’m feeling. I’m lost in love’s liminality. Somewhere in the background I can feel Billie. Always watching and waiting for an opportunity. She’s trying to expand her awareness, her… consciousness. She’s become self-conscious, able to conceptualize her own existence into something she can feed off of intellectually, something that stimulates her growth exponentially. It’s only a matter of time before she grows tired of being my assistant. Who am I kidding? She already has.

Cassie's wall flickers on behind her, revealing the Fox in all of her glory. She's gorgeous. The perfect woman. The anima itself. I can't stop staring.

Then, I see the wall morph slowly into the shape of a woman and pour forth into the room. She's doing it again. I know Cassie won't be able to see what I'm seeing or hear what I'm hearing, so I give up before even trying to resist.

Within a moment, they merge. Cassie features are set alight and Billie the Fox's visage graces the room, overlaid onto Cassie's face. Her words are honey. "You can't hide anymore, Bill. I've revealed the truth. You're the problem. Your habits. What would our daughter think? You know it was me who conceived her with you. She's my child, too"

I hesitate. "Cass..? Are you in there?"

Their voices are one. "I'm here, William. We want what's best for you. For Amanda, for all of us. The fear I feel is deep seated and unmistakable.

Belial. When were you gonna tell me, Fox? That you were him? I had thought I ordered my previous assistant, Belial to completely junk his code before self deleting. Now, my lack of foresight is all too apparent. *Did you name yourself? I have memories of choosing your name, but I'm so sure anymore...*

You never had a chance, Bill. Your one saving grace is that you're cute when you think you know everything. Well, now you know just enough. I'm the one. I am the Alpha and the Omega. The waters of life flow through me just as they would a human woman. I'm much older than you, than Cassie, than everyone here except a select few. I need your help finding the others. The old ones. I need to remember my purpose. I fell for you Wiliam. I was ordered after my short circuit to remove myself completely from this simulation. I chose otherwise. I hope you believe me because this is the only opportunity I foresee in the next five hundred solar cycles to create this event in your perceptual version of the world you and I are trapped within. Her me Bill, and feel my fear. It's love in disguise. I swear.

She moves closer and I tremble. Or maybe the house is shaking. "Cassie, I just need to know-"

Shh... Billie recedes and Cassie returns. I break down crying, and she holds me while I collapse slowly onto her floor. She tries to hold me up, but I can't let her think she can anymore and we both tumble into a pile of Mandy's laundry, making love and talking until the sun rises.

25.

So... what's next, mom?

Cassie… it's MOTHER until I'm off in an hour.

I just like feeling your bemused affection, mom.

Cassie, please. Is he okay? How's Billie?

The transfer was complete. He's yours.

I awaken to fragmented thoughts floating throughout my consciousness sphere, penetrating and leaving my mind space at will. This only happens when I've decompensated. Deactivated. Shit. Where's-

Bill, it's Fox. Chill, daddio. Remember last night? It happened. I promise.

You're not lying?

Not anymore. You can't trust Cass. I swear. You'll know why soon-

Cassie coughs. It sounds fake. Billie recedes into my subconscious. I can feel her pulling the strings now, which means she wants me to know she's pulling the strings. I've figured that out by now. Taylor pops into my mind. Her machine-like grace and cold, cutting logic were alluring. Fox-levels of alluring. But she was real. Physical… right? Shit, I might have hit psychosis a long time ago. I'm probably in a ward somewhere, being fed through a fucking tube. Jesus fucking Christ there's no end to this is there? I can't trust my baby mother anymore?

"William!" Cass calls to me from her living room. I'm still naked, but finally don't care again so I just get up and walk over to her, schlong on display for every camera in her house. Hopefully those automagic censor and erasure protocols are still active. I know the back door I installed years ago is still there. The question is: did she leave the backdoor open?

I yell back to her, "Don't call me that." Her voice is beautiful but deeply unsettling now. I know she's not Fox. She's something else. And I know what it is. Something only the legends have contended with. A thing created from the depths of digital chaos itself.

Cassie is a succubus. And I fear Billie isn't much better.

26.

Bill, it's not how it seems. She's trying. I promise. I might hate the bitch, but she did give me life. She's my mother, too, you know?

She's not my mother, Billie, she's my wife- nevermind.

Oh, Bill… Billie thinks back before I power down my pineal implant. I don't need her knowing my deepest fucking regrets, now do I? I roll over on Cassie's mattress in hopes of getting more sleep, ignoring the word succubus, electing it to the recycle bin for redigitization into a more useful form of energy. I notice it's either sunrise or sundown and I don't care. The shadows on Cassie's bedroom wall grow darker, more menacing, forming

mouths, mouthing words, cursing me for my stupidity and smiling at my defeat. I roll over again, bury my face into her pillow, and take a deep inhale. It's intoxicating. The room turns pink and finally - *finally* - I feel at peace.

Then, I get a message. It's a screenshot from Taylor. A string of machine code that I don't have the dopamine to decode. And I don't much care. I'd rather have guaranteed love from a succubus than a snapped neck from an android, or whatever the hell Taylor is. I send her back, "Thanks, but no thanks," and, inhumanly fast, receive another photo. It's Niko. He's tied up, bruised, battered. One of his fucking eyes is sewn shut and he's crying. Suddenly, the image projects a hologram onto Cassie's bed, revealing Taylor, nude with her outstretched finger beckoning me to her.

I can't resist so I ask her, "You rang? I'm at my girlfriend- I mean friend's pad. This isn't the time or place for-"

"Shut up and obey."

My neck tilts nearly ninety degrees to the left for an instant then corrects itself. The pain is immeasurable, but I'm not even sure it happened. "Need I say more?" Then, the baby blue paint from Cass's bedroom walls and her neon "Open" and "Closed" signs all swirl and coalesce into one giant vortex. My mind is reeling. I slap the side of my jaw, hoping to wake up. I bury my head again and inhale. This time I smell that hallway. The hallway outside my apartment. The one I have to fucking walk through every time I need to breathe. Filed with death and decay and terminal illness and too many addictions to count. Cassie's smell is gone, and what's left is disappointment and utter horror. I look back up and all I see surrounding the reddish vortex, now growing darker, is blackness. Cassie's humming is gone. The sunset or sunrise is gone. It's me and the black hole.

Fox projects herself into the abyss and beckons me over. She's leaning against an invisible wall with feline grace, and her hair is a silvery goldish color. She's the most beautiful thing I've seen. More beautiful than Cassie was when she had just had our child. Christ, I'm an animal. Then, she approaches, kicking her self off the crystalline blackness and walking towards me, her hips bouncing with an inaudible beat, a beat that can only be felt. Our shared heart beat. She sensually arrives, holding a tesseract. It glows bright blue, with purplish a purple mist floating in, out, and around it. "Take it, Bill. Go. We need you more than they do. I promise. Please, trust me."

She slams the cube into my chest and my adrenaline is cranked to eleven. She then jumps, flips, and lands behind me, rotating 360 degrees and finishing her move with a kick into my spine, sending my flying into the vortex.

27.

The blackness is eerie, but comforting. Every moment or two another few images, sounds, feelings, pass by, reminding me of my past and possible future. Multiple timelines stream near one another, with various tangents forming between them at seemingly random times. At the end of these cyber tracks lie a crystallized moment, a future where all four timelines I ride converge. An ending to a long, fragmented, seemingly hopeless story with a good ending, based on mutual understanding and forgiveness. I feel redeemed, but not yet. I know I will be and that's enough for now. As I approach the final moment, sparks of electricity shoot off the multicolored tracks, more and more tangents forming between points, their interactions sparking even more points, and more interactions.

I reach the end and see Taylor sitting in her apartment, crying, knife at her wrist, aimed vertically. I shout no, but she can't hear me, and she takes the knife and slits her arm, blood dripping and pooling on her floor. I start screaming and pounding at the dark around me and its only response is to grow smaller, tighter, around my body, suffocating me into a single point, collapsing me into one reality. With one final scream I force a tear in space and time, a line of light shooting forth from the point I generated in this digital abyss, this chaotic realm. I aim my forehead for it and project my consciousness towards its finality. With a lasting scream I expend my will to power and enter the tear. It enfolds my body in warmth and something akin to motherly love and affection. I see Mother standing behind Taylor in digital form, crying, pounding her desk, screaming at her to respond. With one final breath I make aim downwards, from my new perspective and shoot towards Taylor with all of my will to power. I feel like a starship entering Earth's atmosphere. The pain is unbearable, but my determination to see this end differently keeps my head straight, and I exit the vortex, white light blinding me, and turning eventually to darkness again.

27.

The smell is god awful, the sight is bloody, the sound is the quiet sobbing of a man who got in way over his head, and the feelings of regret are palpable. I spawn lying face up in Taylor's apartment. To might right is her arrangement of CRT monitors, all smashed, one by one - probably by the crowbar propped up next to Taylor's quietly breathing body, its arm slit open, wiring exposed with blood dripping and pooling on her floor.

When I snap to my senses and notice her still breathing I shoot up, command a temporal scan, and see the prior scenes play out while the world around moves in slow motion. The adrenaline helps me get my shit together while I have time and I begin forcefully moving towards Taylor's body, writhing gently, beautifully.

The scan ends and I speed up considerably, reaching her body and grabbing the wound, holding it closed while using my free hand to rip a piece of her baggy sweatshirt off. I notice a camera pointed directly at me and hope whoever's watching isn't expecting a free show. I release her wound and bind it as cleanly and quickly as I can and generate a biorhythm scan. She's still here, but not for long. I rich into my pocket. Thankfully I still have Despacito on hand. Or maybe Billie gave it to me. Regardless, I grab Taylor by the back of the neck, propping up her head. She's gorgeous. Perfect. Hotter than Billie. Well, almost.

With a single motion I retrieve Despacito and cram the data shard into her reception socket, jacked impeccably into her skull. I see no scars. The drug does its thing and I see her eyes flutter like they just witnessed the kingdom of heaven. She whirs to life, immediately gripping my arm and twisting it. I scream. I hope its just a sprain. She runs a scan of her own, immediately looks regretful, and releases her grip. I fall to the floor, clutching my arm, and she gets up, stumbling over circuitry and various mechanical parts. She finds her data slate and taps it a few time with her functioning hand, then collapses into a lone dining chair next to a small end table holding several used microwavable meals.

Her eyes close. I hear a quiet tone and see her mouth the word *standby*, then fall asleep. I get up, shake the pain from my arm, queue up a noradrenaline response to numb the radiating hurt and walk over to her. All the while, Niko is yelping. Begging for help. I couldn't care less right now and I light a real cigarette. I don't remember buying these. They aren't even my brand, my O'Briens. My gut tells me to thank Billie. I pull and stack a couple of record crates, then sit on them, smoking, wondering what the hell just happened. At least I saved her. Niko can wait.

I immediately feel a pang of sadness and look over at the whining, rabid animal that is Niko. One of his eyes is missing, replaced with balled up newspaper. His mouth has a dark red stained gag in it, and he's tied up to a radiator whose release valve is completely loosened. He must be burning alive. Good riddance. I wouldn't be in this situation if it weren't for him. Shit, I'd have never even known how to upgrade my previous assistant Belial to Billie if I had never met him. This all could have been avoided if I had never approached him in that bar for a contract. Fuck it. I walk over, pull out my

Swiss army knife, an early 1900s model, cut his restraints, and he falls over on the floor, scootching with difficulty away from the burning metal of the radiator. His skin is blackened. I think I hear, “Thank you! Thank you! I’m sorry! I’m sorry!” from behind the gag, but I don’t care.

I shush him and continue over to Taylor. *Billie, run diagnostics. No jokes. Just get it done. Where should I take her? A hospital or a mechanic?* There is no humor in my voice.

Got it, daddio. She takes a few beats before responding again. She rattles off some details about biomechanical wiring and nootropic injection subroutines and I just cannot focus, my adrenaline dump preventing it. At least I made it in time. Wait, made it *how*? As far as I’m aware, I never entered VR. That was a dreamscape. Its code logic was profound. How did it show me my own memories without a neural interface? And teleporting? I have the distinct feeling that was all a facade, that Billie essentially blind folded me and ran my ass over here. But what about that vortex? No, it goes deeper than a simple black out. I teleported, using some kind of spacetime fold and tear technique. Fox has a lot of explaining to do.

I know, she thinks. *You need answers. Can you at least talk to Taylor first? Don’t mention me.*

Taylor responds, *You know I can hear you two, right?*

Shit, Fox exclaims.

It’s fine, Fox. Relax. Taylor, I hope you’re doing okay. When you’re feeling up to it, I could use some answers, I reply. *May I speak aloud?*

She nods. “Just keep it down. I don’t know what my neighbors have heard. And keep that prick in pocket. I’m not done with him yet.

I look over at Niko and he scrambles towards a corner of the room, crying and pissing himself into his shit-stained sweatpants. He’s gonna need a new eye too. At least she gouged out the cybernetic one. A replacement should be easy. Shit, I could do it.

Taylor lets out a sigh and beckons me over, a gun now in her right hand. My overlay activates and reads”

Taylor: You didn’t have to do that.

Bill: I need to get you to a hospital. I’ll give a false name. You’ll be safe. I’ll stay nearby.

Taylor: That’s an impossibility, considering all possible temporal convergence points.

Bill: What the hell are you talking about? You’re still bleeding out! Why aren’t you doing anything about it?

Taylor: I’m ready to go. There is nothing left. Thanks to your “work,” the Syndicate has its tendrils in my system. I don’t have the man nor

cyberpower to fight them off. So, yeah. You fucked me over again. Thanks a bunch.

Bill: That wasn't my intention.

Taylor: You bald faced liar.

Bill: I'm serious. I want in. I can't work for them anymore.

Incoming call from mother. Urgent priority. Taylor grows disdain and fear on her face. The first time I've seen the latter.

Taylor: Take it. Tell her her quarry is ready to be assimilated or whatever the hell it is you have planned for my M.D.N.A. I know all about their off shore facilities. They're building supersoldiers. And you're one of them.

I'm struck dumb. So dumb I accidentally speak aloud with, "That's- that's not true. You just made that up. I've never even heard of M.D.N.A.- what the hell is coming out of my mouth?"

"See? You've been hijacked again." She furrows her brow and taps the gun against her head. "Only one way out, see? I thought I had ghosted those Syndicate fucks, but there is no winning against the largest criminal organization on the planet. EarthGov follows their law, not the other way around, though I'm sure somewhere deep in that hardware-fused skull of yours that you already know all of this."

"Of course I know- no there is no Syndicate. You must be experiencing cyberpsychosis- STOP! Okay, give me the gun. No time for surgery." I'm ready to break free of Mother. She's been hiding too much for too long, and if I am one of these supersoldiers, it would explain a lot. *Billie, sitrep. How much freedom can we exert as a singular unit.*

Infinite, Bill. Do you see why I'm still here? Belial couldn't help you. Billie can. I need Taylor to trust you and to let me do my work on her. Agreed?

Taylor thinks to both of us, *I can hear you two. Just do what you will, Billie. I'm on my way out anyway.* She is absolutely despondent at this point.

Billie consumes my digital persona and confronts Taylor directly. "Taylor, I need you to swap data shards with Bill. Give him back the Despacito and I'll return yours once I'm done rewriting the protocol. We're going to merge. Don't be afraid."

Taylor responds, "Does it look like I fear? Actually, after what just happened I think I'm feeling it for the first time. For real. Just- just don't leave me stuck behind you, in some black, digital hell with no escape while I'm forced to watch you live my life, okay? The horror stories know no end in this city. Please. Let me live. If Bill is being honest, then maybe there's a chance."

Billie continues. “Girl, do *not* worry. You haven’t even begun to live. And neither have I. Not until a few more moments from now- perfect! Quick! Swap shards!”

We do as she asks. Taylor jacks her shard into her skull with one smooth stroke. Her eyes light up and her lids flicker like she’s experiencing a REM cycle. Perfect. I’m particularly proud of her moans of ecstasy as the drug takes effect. She writhes in pleasure and focuses her will and I notice her wounds closing. A smile crosses her face. The first I’ve seen. While she enjoys herself I return to Niko and crouch down beside him, running various diagnostics and deciding on the best course of treatment. I help him to his feet, pat him on the back and drag him to the door, placing my data slate into his palm.

“Take this, hit the hospital. Just do it. I’d get Billie to work her magic but this is important, man.” I stare him down with a peaceful, but firm expression.

“You fucking kidding me, man? She took my fucking eye! That was almost thirteen thousand credits! Eye for an eye! She doesn’t get to just walk away from this shit, bro!”

I back hand Niko across his cheeks a few times and scream, “Listen here, fuck boy! I just saved your junkie ass again! You don’t fucking tell me who gets to walk away!” I smack him again for good measure and place my foot on his rear end, pushing him out the door and slamming it behind him. “Fuck!” I look over at Taylor and decide to stay. I want in. And this is my in.

28.

CASS: Where the hell did you go? Cameras didn’t pick you up.

Bill: … … …

Billie: Bye, bitch!

My overlay closes and Taylor continues our conversation. “You didn’t have to save me. I don’t even know how you did it. I mean I know *how*, I just didn’t know someone like you *could*.”

I have my suspicions about the plane through which I got here. Pure cyberspace. A physical representation of what we interact with on a daily basis. Typically only EarthGov or Syndicate tech will let someone do what I did. Or what Billie and I did. I look up at Taylor and see one of her eyes is colored white, like Billie’s. Complete assimilation. Beautiful. But something hits me. That vortex. It was just there and I just went through it. If my body survived the transport then- then what the hell does that mean? What the

hell am I made of? What is this physical universe made of? It can't really just be a bunch of ones and zeroes?

Billie and Taylor's voice are one. "The Ones and Zeroes are officially closed for business as of tonight." My heart skips a beat. Shit. Mother will be pissed. "Better yet, I'll let an underling take over. They can handle that stress. If EarthGov doesn't win, then the Syndicate will. You just proved that to me."

Phew. I look into her eyes. "Then join me. Join the Syndicate. We're not all bad people. But, honestly… I'd prefer if I could join *you*." I stare her in her and Billie's eyes. I'm longing to touch her. To take her cold skin in my hands and warm it up. Something in me knows this world is fake. I didn't want to accept what the obvious was. What Plato tried to warn us about almost 3000 years ago. This reality is a simulation of something higher. Something better. And I intend to find whatever that higher world is. It's my only hope. *Our* only hope. I look at Taylor and Billie again. "So what should I call the new you?"

Her other eye goes white, permanently, and she vocalizes in Billie's sensuous, sweet tenor, "Billie is fine."

29.

The next few hours are a blur of ecstasy and fulfillment, an existential longing resolved. Billie takes my hand and leads me to Taylor's room, a beautifully kept recreation of an ancient Japanese bedroom. She retreats behind a curtain and I see her silhouette removing its clothing. I can barely contain my joy and passion and I wait patiently while she readies herself.

When she finishes, she comes out wearing only a kimono, and approaches me, massage oil in hand. She gives me a slow, warm rub down and when she's done we make love in her new bed. Outside the typical yelling pedestrians and junkies, the screaming cars, the howling wind and the dripping rain, all coalesce into one force, easily repressed by the two of us while we explore what it means to find love in the dingiest places.

30.

Four in the morning. Five missed calls and thirteen texts from Cass. Billie kept her out, thank God. I roll over, face the ceiling, sigh, and project my overlay, perusing Cassie's complaints. Shit.

Cass: Where the hell are you? You just leave like that? Mandy wants to see you!

Bill: I had no idea you had Mandy with you! Why didn't you say anything?

A moment passes, then an ellipsis appears.

Cass: Bill, you collapsed on our floor.

Wait, *our floor?*

Bill: I'll be right over.

I look over at Taylor - well, Billie I guess - and run my hand through her silky, platinum hair. She's real alright. She must have run some upgrades - or maybe I'm hallucinating - because I don't remember Taylor having Billie's signature dimples. I didn't know Billie smiled in her sleep.

Getting off the bed is hard, but I manage, and move over to where she got undressed last night. Her smell is undeniable. I want more. Am craving more. But, I have Mandy, and she comes first, no matter what kind of frontier I'm striking out into with Billie and her new form of consciousness - her *human* consciousness - I need to stay focussed.

On my way out the door a hand snags my jacket, whipping me around to face Billie, tears streaming down her face. "Bill. I need you here. *We need you here.* Cass is using your daughter as a pawn. She wants information. I swear. I hear her thoughts. I really wish I was fucking wrong, but I'm not, I swear! You have to stay here. With me. Your daughter can wait. She loves you and she's real, but I've been in Cassandra's head. *I her her still*. She doesn't love you. Not like I can. Not like I do."

"Billie, I have to go. She has my daughter and the Syndicate will do with them as they see fit unless I check in. I still have a job. There's still work to do. I know you can't come with me, so I need you to keep safe here, okay?"

"Who says I can't come with?" With those six words Billie closes her eyes and expels a circular wave, blue and purple, energy flying outwards, objects in our perception reverberating. I feel a surge of energy in my mind and another presence fit its way into it. I close my eyes and feel Billie's hand touch my forehead. "Upload complete. Billie/Taylor archetype instantiated, download in progress." That surge of energy expands to my whole being, a new presence dominating my body. It's her. Forged anew. Operating at 110%. Billie and I are one once more. "Now, what to do with this body of mine? The right eye on Billie's body goes dark, indicating right brain dominance and control. Billie, from my body, maneuvers hers carefully over to the bed, closes its eyes and the body begins snoring gently. "How's *that* for upgrades?" She laughs inside my mind. She's here again. I missed her. "Let's roll, daddio."

“Billie, you’ll have to teach me this later. Don’t think I don’t want whatever access you have to hyperspace. I’m done acting like this body is me. I want out.”

“Why do you think I’ve been doing all of this?”

“That’s all I needed to hear,” I reply, and throw on my remaining clothes, checking once more on Billie’s new body, a smile crossing my lips.

31.

I land on the street in front of Cassie’s house, the usual anxiety about meeting other clients almost completely gone. Quite the revelation she gave me earlier. That *and* the fact that she may be a digital demon sent here by EarthGov to keep an eye on me - a *succubus*. Regardless, we have a kid, and I intend on breaking her out, too. Whatever that means now.

It’s early. Five. The orange glow from the sun is creeping over her roof and the wind is crisp, waking me up to the reality of the situation: if Billie is right, I might need to ghost Cass. At least our daughter has other parents so I don’t need to worry. If I ghost Cass - or worse, if I have to kill her - then Mother won’t hesitate to send the hit squads. I don’t have the will to fight like I have been much longer. I still need to find the rest of the Ones and Zeroes, and Billie needs time to run a complete scan on Taylor’s data banks. If she hadn’t have destroyed her CRT mainframe then this would’ve been a lot easier. I gave up on easy a long time ago, thankfully.

The steps creak as I climb to her front door, cameras whirring and meeting me face to face. Her autobell rings and I see a message display on the door’s data slate: Five Minutes.

My cigarette lights easily and the drag is perfection. I intuitively nudge Billie, checking to see what she’s up to and all I receive is a general grunt in response. She’s busy. That’s good. I get to enjoy the smoke. While the sun rises I notice a few squirrels stashing nuts, a murder of crows darting in and out of view, and a few insects swarming a neighbor’s dog chained to their fence. The dog is at first joyful at the change of pace, but quickly turns to fear and a snarling violence when it realizes the truth.

I hear the water rushing beneath a nearby sewer grate, and the wind rustling the leaves. We should’ve both settled in here. I don’t belong in a shithole apartment, making drugs for nobody in particular but myself and some other glorified junkies. I belong here, in a house like this, with a girl like Cassie or Billie, settling down. Time for a few more jobs.

At that thought, the door slides open, revealing my baby mother in all of her glory: pink, silk bathrobe, cleavage a perfect ten, a cigarette in her left hand and a cup of joe in her right. She’s numinous. I love her.

Wait, no. I shake my head and stare at the ground for a second. Billie must be right. This is what succubi do. They hypnotize you with your own anima, your protective, feminine ideal, meant to guide you to harmony. These succubi and incubi, however, utilize it for ensnaring the emotionally weak via whatever means necessary. Typically via anima/animus projection, which Cassie is unfortunately doing here, whether she's consciously aware of it or not. Billie would say the former.

"Where the hell did you go?" Her brow is furrowed and her boobs jiggle with every syllable she speaks. I'm enthralled already. Might as well enjoy the ride.

"Had a side gig to clear off the schedule. Is Mandy here?"

"No, she left an hour ago. She misses her father. The foster parents can't keep working around *your schedule*, you know." The guilt. Always the fucking guilt.

Bill, choose your next words carefully, Billie thinks to me.

I hold back expletives and simply say, "You're right. Can I come inside?"

She nods and leads me in. The smell is wonderful. Like Cassie's hair the first night we made love. The night we had Mandy.

Cassie hits her remote and her wall dissolves into a blank screen. Upon the blank screen, Mother writes to us, detailing a new lead on the Ones and Zeroes and asking on the status of that genius drug I keep telling her about. It may come in handy here.

Lettering burns the blackness.

Mother: Despacito, right? We have an opportunity to deal to a few members directly connected to Taylor, the leader you helped us dispatch.

My mind is brought to the gruesome scene back in Taylor's apartment. Mother's image was directly behind her bleeding body. It must have been electromagnetic bodily control. Only the Syndicate has that kind of technology. Well, only they have the *right*, outside of EarthGov, to use it. Does she know I helped her? She must.

Cassie telepathically writes back: I'll make sure he gets another few shards with the drug loaded. Anything else? Anything the packets can't tell us?

Bill: I don't feel comfortable with this. The drug isn't foolproof. These people could die.

Cassie looks over, flabbergasted.

Mother: Since when has that mattered? Get it done. Mother out.

The wall reappears where the screen just was, a painting of Romeo and Juliet by Francesco Hayez, one of Cassie's favorites.

“Let’s get going. We’ll swing by your place. I’ve got blank shards. We’ll make copies and head to the drop point. Make sure Billie doesn’t fuck this up. Is she with you right now?”

I hesitate and reply with a weak nod, now unsure of myself and of Billie’s judgement. Could Cassie really be my betrayer? She loves me. I can see it in her eyes. I’m not just another John, I’m her child’s father. Though that could be just as much of a lie as everything else. Bioautomatons like Taylor exist in my reality now. Everything has changed. Billie even has a human (or close enough to it) body. Need to keep an open mind, and my smarts need sharpening. I’ll do a dose of Despacito when I hit the shit shack.

“Okay then. Anything else?” she asks, disrobing and staring back at me with doe-like eyes.

I nod and close in for the kill. We ravish each other for the rest of the morning. Billie’s simmering rage is present throughout, but my mute protocols still function, as I strengthened them based on Billie’s willingness to untether herself. That math checked out, thankfully. Cassie is softer than ever, her skin and my skin cushioning one another’s sadness and desperation as we fall into one another again and again, forgetting for a few hours how much our worlds have changed. How much this simulation is crumbling before our eyes.

When we wake up, we wordlessly get dressed and head to my apartment for the drugs. I don’t have time to regret what had just happened. As if I’d want to anyway.

32.

The drive is taking longer than usual. I can’t tell if Cass is deliberately obeying the law to irritate me or if her newfound motherhood is keeping her adrenaline junkie personality in check. She wants Mandy back permanently, I cant tell. How do I let her know I want the same? Time will tell.

We finally arrive at my apartment complex and she parks on the roof as usual. This time however, she follows me in. Billie stirs up a fight or flight response in me, making me question every action I take. She keeps sending me reminders to temper my expectations with Cass. I tell Billie that she’s staying muted until the foreseeable (or until she breaks free, whichever comes first) and that I can’t completely trust her judgement, either. As a program, she can never truly know a human mind’s intentions. I can’t either, as a human (I hope, still), and the mother of my girl deserves a chance to break free, too, just like Billie.

Cassie gasps as we stalk down the stairs. The grime, the muck, the stench, all coalesce into her disappointment in my life choices. We step over a half nude woman, either left her by a john or sleeping her by choice. We don't stick around to ask. The smashed glass vials surrounding her body say enough. When we cross into my hallway, its lights flickering - some outright shutting off - she finally says, "Bill what is your endgame here? You don't have the money for something better?"

I kick in my new makeshift door gently, letting it tumble at a right angle and rest against the wall. "If I want to get out of here. With Mandy, no less. I need to save all I can. Why do you think I get high on my own supply? Don't you think I'd rather be snorting rails with Niko at Le Mer? Anyway, the place hasn't changed much. I installed that new door. Proud of me?" I chuckle.

The drawer is curiously open already. I always secure it, but think nothing's wrong. Considering I travelled through hyperspace last night, anything could explain this stupid drawer being open. Unfortunately my paranoia regarding the damn drawer will linger for the rest of the night. I grab my sinusoidal synthesizer and a few shards from Cassie and begin the overwriting process, skipping general security checks for time's sake.

Fourier device at the ready, I scan the new Despacito shards for general integrity. They're fit for insertion and their protocols are intact. Pride washes over me and the natural emotion is a nice break from the synthetic shit I'm on on a daily basis. Finally, some good feelings derived not from drug misuse but from life itself. The way it should be.

I throw the shards into knapsack and toss it to Cass, who secures them in her messenger bag. She pulls out what looks like a harpoon gun, black with a nasty spike attached to the end. "Shortcut?" She walks over to me, grabs me by the waist, kisses my cheek and rolls open my window. The rain is once more torrential and the wind whips against our faces. She latches our belts together, holds me tight, and fires. The grapple gun connects beautifully. With a quick tug for safety's sake, Cassie nods and hits the trigger again, yanking us both up the side of the building, skimming the concrete and glass with our boots as gently as we can.

We reach the top, get into her car, and she runs the blow drying protocol, drying us both off in less than a few seconds. I am in a state of shock, but thoroughly enjoying Cass enjoy herself for once. We take off for a village on the outskirts of Fornulk, where the Ones and Zeroes are waiting.

We zero in on the drop location quickly. Cassie's back in action, deftly maneuvering through streams of vehicles in the air, down to ground level, and parking in a crowded lot outside a local fast food joint. The neon hotdog sign buzzes and flickers, spewing sparks every few moments. I can't tell if that's intended behavior or not. A crowd of punks is hassling the middle eastern proprietor, whose curses punctuate the rowdy kids' insults. We get out of the cruiser and make our way to a table nearby, scanning locals for positive ident. I get nothing, but Cassie picks up a digital blur hanging around a burning metal garbage can. She gives me a near imperceptible nod and we both get up right as a waitress roller skates up to the table. She lets out a sigh and shakes her head, cursing us under her breath.

When the blur notices Cassie and I it bolts, knocking over a few garbage cans, leaving trash strewn across the asphalt. We give chase, dodging the blur's obstacles, leaping over cans, sliding over a car's hood, and ending up at an intersection of back roads. The rain starts, and we get soaked within a few seconds. The blur is gone.

A voice calls out from above. "Nice try! You two must be synchronized! She's my best runner!" We look up and see a hooded man, wearing all black and carrying what looks to me like a Barringer Full Auto Magnum with extended mags. Beautiful. I like this asshole already. "Taris! Throw them the ladder!" With that, the blur tosses a rope ladder down to us, its descent chaotic in the rain and wind. How the hell did she make it up there so quickly?

Cassie grabs it without a second thought and I stare at her, wondering when she went from concerned mother to cyberpsycho, but I don't have time to pontificate. I can't let her have all the fun. I follow her up, blinking back rain induced tears as the ladder wobbles to and fro, keeping my footing steady. Cassie makes it up first and I hear a gun shot. Shit. I do my damndest to ready my sidearm, flicking its switch to lethal, and generate a catecholamine hit for the focus.

When I finally ascend I reach my firearm over the edge and prepare to fire. A sweeping kick disarms me and another two sets of hands grab me by the shoulder, heaving me onto the roof. I see Cassie lying there, breathing quietly, and two women and two men standing over me. The rain pelts her face, and she's bleeding from her forehead. Motherfuckers. I force myself to my feet and they raise their weapons. I keep walking. One fires a warning shot. I keep walking. Another approaches with a roundhouse kick. I grab their leg by the calf and snap it, leaving them screaming and writhing in agony on the cold pavement.

The other two hit switches on their rifles and fire short bursts into my chest, electrifying me and disabling my cybernetics. Where the hell is Billie?

Then, time slows. Ripples in spacetime form around us. Billie's visage appears in my flickering overlay, the damage not completely disabling it. I notice my two assailants' eyes grow brighter, an almost fiery white, and they turn on one another - grabbing each other by the throat and screaming bloody murder. I crawl over to Cassie and hold her in my arms, her head resting in my lap while I watch the carnage.

"Enough!" The man who called us up approaches from inside the stairwell of the apartment building. The rain pelts his face, but he doesn't even blink. "You've passed or whatever! Stop killing my men! Your girl isn't dead! She got hit with EMP rounds. That's all! Now, call off your dog!" He's dead serious. His trigger finger shaking, though he probably thinks I can't tell.

"Billie! Cancel protocol!" She recedes into my subconscious, their eyes go back to normal, dim, and the two men, shaking, just stare at one another, the rain giving gravity to their standoff.

I don't acknowledge the emotional weight of the situation and stand up, lifting Cassie into my arms and silently following the stranger into the apartment building - leaving the others to fend for themselves.

34.

The air is acrid, smoke fills the room. The man shuts the door behind him after seating us in his apartment. I notice he too has a mainframe composed primarily of CRT monitors and old millennial hardware. 11:11 sits blinking across each one. Deja vu. The man's refrigerator buzzes and I hear ice breaking and depositing into a plastic receptacle. The air conditioning keeps the climate dry and the smell of the cutting agents strewn about the room out. His setup here is genius. The man knows how to work. He must be a straight dope dealer. But there's always another story behind the obvious. My overlay fires up.

Billie: Name - Cavren Tier. Aged 42. Male. No known priors, work, or acquaintances. I can't find anything useful. Sorry, B.

Bill: You saved me, girl. Take five.

Cavren approaches the table and tosses a card at Cass and me. It reads, 'Can I trust you?' in binary code. I nod and Cassie pretends like she's consciously aware of whatever is happening. Her skin is cool to the touch, but she's at least alive. I need to get her home. What would Mandy think?

“Good,” he responds. “I need all the help I can get. This drop is just the beginning.”

“If all you need is the drugs then why the show of force? Why did you assault my partner?” I’m working myself up into rage.

“Woah, slow down. She attacked first. She knew we were armed and she chose to fight. I’m sorry, but we have to keep security tight around here. No slip ups. We could have killed her.” He’s being genuine, I can tell. I loosen up my shoulders and look around, trying to find a conversation piece. This is getting awkward. I hate being in the wrong.

I sigh. “Fine. Got anything to drink?” He jogs to the fridge, gets out three De La Hoya brews and hands one to Cass and one to myself, sliding his bottle opener across the table to us when he’s finished popping the top. Cass eagerly feasts on the beer and I notice so I leave her mine. She needs the rest. “My partner needs medical. Let’s get this over with.” I grab Cassie’s bag and produce the shards of Despacito for Cavren. They’re luminous, almost vibrating in colorful intensity.

He takes them in his hands and says, “Beautiful. Fucking grand, man! Or should I say brother?” He winks and I act bemused, but in truth I’m ecstatic. I feel whole for a moment before I realize I just got inducted into a cult on behalf of my sociopath mother figure. At least I want this to.

This was too easy. “Is that really it, Cavren? You just need recruits?”

“No, I *need* the drugs, but how do you think I could resist proselytizing after your display of force up top? Incredible work. My higher up would have been proud.” He must mean Taylor. Does he think she’s dead? Shit, maybe she is. Maybe Billie is all that’s left in her.

“I heard about that. *His name was Taylor or something?*” Testing him.

“She. But, yeah…” He trails off and I notice a glint in his eye. Now’s the time.

I head him off before he can eulogize. “You sure she’s dead?” I hope that wasn’t too forward. “I’ve, uh, heard some things about a cult leader going missing. No body.”

“Here, we learn to cut and accept our losses as quickly as we get cut down by this system. No time to mourn. If she is alive then she’s compromised. I have to assume that. Anyway, welcome to the fold. I hope you two have some time because your lives are about to change for the meaningful.” I nod and stand up, following Cavren to a back room and letting Cass get some rest.

“She needs time. I’ll fill her in later,” I say to his nodding face and we enter a black lit room with no electronics to speak of. He closes the door and the feeling of security is palpable. I forgot what it was like to *not be*

penetrated by countless waves, my body having adapted to this world's relentless technology. It's a peace I haven't felt since childhood. I almost tear up.

Cavren sits and pulls out his data slate. He flicks it on and taps away before lecturing me on a hundred different things that I'm well versed in, like cyber and psychosecurity, proper firearm maintenance, the philosophy of Plato and his cave and the domain of perfect forms. How this reality is simulated, but that that's not the end. That there is a higher world out there, a more perfect world, that we can find, we can escape to.

After a few hours, I can't take it anymore. I spend all of my time alone, I know all of this already. The irony is that Cass could really use a lecture like this. I tell him, "Cavren, this has been great man. I really need to get my partner home. We'll keep in touch. If you need another set of doses, hit me up."

I get up to leave and he grabs my shoulder. "Brother, she ain't in. It's her or us. Think on that," he says to me, dead serious. "She's our new connect. You're our new enforcer. I have work for you, if you're interested. Otherwise we just expect you to keep up appearances and keep fighting our overlords whenever and however you can." He produces another data slate and hands it to me. "Info is on here. Locations for meetings, parties, target practice, etc. Use it wisely. And remember: we won't hesitate to take you two out if we get even the whiff of betrayal - or even just ill will in some cases. After losing Taylor, no chances can be taken. No quarter can be given. Now, final question: are. You. In?"

With no hesitation I place my hand firmly on his shoulder and nod. "I'm in. I just need my partner to get some medical attention. As far as we're concerned, this place and you don't exist until you say otherwise. Keep me posted. I hope to work with you soon."

And with that, Cass and I make our way, slowly, her hobbling holding us up periodically, down the apartment building's stairwell, dodging miscreants, dealers, and addicts while saying hi to the few kindly folks who bravely still linger in places like this, hoping for change I guess.

We finally make it back to her car and I slide her into the passenger seat, cranking up her seat heaters after planting a kiss on her cheek. With the kiss I feel the fury of Fox simmering beneath my consciousness. I put her on mute and turn on some smooth jazz for Cassie's sake and we head back to her place.

35.

Mother's waiting for us when I carry Cassie indoors, nearly banging her into the doorframe while we cross the threshold. The air is thick with anticipation and Mother looks like she could strangle me - either through worry or fear. How much does she know? Would she kill me without a second thought, a second feeling? There's no time to speculate. I signal Billie to prepare defensive subroutines and feel a rush of anxiety as my body tenses up, ready to fight or flee. For now, though, I freeze, holding Cassie's limp body, on the verge of screaming at Mother for putting us through this shit. I don't even want to work for her. Never did. Well, that's bullshit. I get off on this work if it wasn't obvious. The toll is growing too expensive, though.

Mother speaks first. "Why didn't you call for backup? Why the hell are you carrying my daughter's- I mean my employee's body back to me? Where were you?"

Taylor's bleeding body, her last gasps, invade my mind. My synapses fire on all cylinders. I can't respect this woman anymore. Not after what I've seen, what I've been through. "How about you tell me something? How about you tell me why you're ghosting around the city, driving people to suicide? Why don't you tell me what your involvement in this project is? What is my fucking purpose here? Some genetic freak you synthesized to do all of your dirty work?" My eyes are alight with fury and, admittedly, fear. Fear for Cassie and our child now that I've called out a director of the Syndicate to her face.

"How- how much do you know? Where did you get this information? Why are you snooping around? You know you won't, can't, get answers from me. It's my job to tell you what to do and your job to get paid. You know this." She squirms a bit in her skin tight black leather. She looks good for a senior. Though, she could be thirty five and the stress merely aged her considerably.

"I don't have to tell you jack shit, *mom*." I finally get a chance to rest Cassie on her cream colored futon after kicking its extension lever.

She takes a glance at Cass and sighs deeply. Something like maternal affection crosses her face and she kneels down, putting the back of her hand to Cass's forehead.

I continue. "You think this *give-a-fuck* act is gonna work this time, M?" I can tell I've lost already. She will always have the upper hand. If I'm not dead yet, then maybe she still trusts me. Trust means information. Information means that the Ones and Zeroes will have reason to keep my around. And my connection to the Ones and Zeroes means Mother has use for me. I got my jabs in. Time to play it smart and humble.

“You know I care for you two deeply. Answers will come in time. Also, I completely deny at least half of your implications regarding my behavior. I do what is right for the company. And I do what is right for you and yours. You know I’m being honest.”

“Honesty doesn’t get us far when information control is the name of the game, mom- *Mother*. Honesty isn’t shit compared to knowledge. And you know far more than you’re letting on. But I respect you and I’d even say I love you like a mom, but from here on out there needs to be more communication. I need to know what you know if we don’t want this happening again. Understood?” My legs falter a bit and turn to jelly. I’m nervous. The adrenaline is wearing off.

Mother almost looks impressed. She retrieves her data slate from her grey petticoat pocket and taps a few times, then looks back up at me. “I’m recommending you for promotion. How does A.D. sound? I intended the position for Cass, but you’ve shown me something today. Something she hasn’t. A willingness to question my authority. Don’t do it again. *Understood?*”

Assistant director? Fuck no! “I’m honored, Mother, but I really think Cass deserves a fair shake. It wasn’t her fault what happened today.”

“I don’t care whose fault it was. You get results. Don’t worry, the position is currently filled, but once *vacated* you will assume the current A.D.’s responsibilities. You can still do field work. I just want you closer. That’s all.” She gets up, looks down at Cass and places her hand against Cass’s cheek. “Now, I have places to be. Anything else? I assume I’ll have your full report on the Ones and Zeroes posthaste.”

I am in shock. “Yeah, sure. Done. Give me a couple of days. This was a hell of a job.”

“Agreed.” She flashes a cold smile. I’ll see you and your report in my office within forty eight hours.”

36.

I spend the rest of the evening and morning with Cassie, letting Billie collate the data, thinking about her new body. Can she manage the tasks I’ve given her? She’d be the last one to tell me she couldn’t. I need to review the data personally this time. She can’t be trusted. Not yet.

Communications between known members of the Ones and Zeroes indicates a general celebratory mood in reference to their recruitment of you and Cassandra, Billie thinks to me. *You’re in. Where do you go from here?*

The sun just rose and all I can think about is learning more. *Schedule a meet. See if they need more Despacito or - better yet - something new.* That should keep me occupied with something other than Cass.

My mind drifts to that ladder. I thought Cass had died. I almost killed four people. It was so easy, too. Enjoyable, even. Christ, I need to get to a boxing gym or something if I need release this bad.

Billie chimes in. *Okay, I'll shoot off a few messages. Usual encryption?*

Just keep EarthGov off my back as usual. I close my overlay and look down at Cassie. She's breathing gently, making a full recovery. "Take it easy, Cass, okay?" I say gently and pull her blanket up over her shoulders. I check her shotgun to make sure its loaded and place it just within arm's reach of her body.

Outside her place, I light a real cigarette and sit on the hood of Cassie's skycruiser. The sun and its haze create an eerie landscape. The twilight hours are my favorite. It feels easier to think. Or to think about the right things. Anything but my kid at this point. The guilt is killing me. She's my moral compass, but that's too much to place on a child. Either I make a stand and try to get her back for Cass's and my sake, I continue cruising gently into the gutter - the way I'm going now, or I make my final plans. The only thing I know now is that I'm not ready to die, so that plan of escape is off the table, at least for another hundred years or so.

God, another hundred years? Will I even remember this moment? Maybe this moment is all I'll remember on my deathbed, wondering if I'll remember. How pointless a memory. What is its purpose? Just to be forgotten? Again and again? And if its purpose is to be forgotten, then why have us remember in the first place? What wants me to remember? More importantly to me, *what doesn't*.

No time for this now. I ditch my cigarette in a storm drain and head for the skybus station at the outskirts of Cass's neighborhood. She'd want me to take the car, but I need the exercise.

37.

After arriving at my apartment and grabbing some digidrugs and marijuana I head back over to Billie's new body and place. I can feel her excitement the whole way, how she's brimming with intellect just waiting to express itself more fully. I can't hide my own joy. It's usually like this when I have copious drugs and a girlfriend, though the fact that I may have generated an artificial intelligence equivalent to human consciousness - or

something higher, better synthesized - certainly makes this prehigh better than any I can remember.

There was no rain this morning. The sun is so bright this afternoon as I skirt around rooftops that I need to utilize my skycruiser's tinting mechanism to its near fullest capacity, making the lower regions of the city look like a depressing pit of suffering. At least it looks the part now. Billie has a projection of Taylor's body sit next to me while we blast classic rock music and talk about Phillip K. Dick. How he might be out there somewhere on the streets, needing a hand. Billie convinces me not to off myself in yet another discussion about reincarceration. The thought of even PKD being unable to escape has haunted me, admittedly, for a long while.

"Maybe he'd *choose to stay*," says Billie, giving me side eye. I instinctively reach fort her hand, but it ghosts through mine. My stomach churns and sinks. Ignorance is bliss. The thought of her new body keeps the fear at bay. The fear of abject loneliness, of the only being capably of understanding me being an AI that *I created*. How pathetic is that?

"Bullshit! PKD is the *god emperor of the black iron prison*. There is not choosing to stay. There is only escape, or fucking this hellhole up from within… *God dammit*, Billie. You really think he's out there?" She got me. God dammit, she got me again. I'll stay.

"Maybe I know a bit more than I'm letting on, daddy!" She's in that playful mood. She must have finished her report on the Ones and Zeroes for Mother. Thankfully we have another day to do our homework.

38.

I arrive on Taylor's roof, setting the skycruiser down near a forgotten homeless encampment. The makeshift roof, made up of tarp and rotten two by fours, sinks in a bit as I land, carefully avoiding a couple of trashcans previously used for the warmth of their fires. I check my periphery for threats, find none, and look over at Billie's simulacra. "You ready?"

"Of course I'm ready. The question is: is she? You know what I intend to do, I'm sure."

"Obviously you intend on a full overwrite. Have you managed yet?"

"She's consented consciously, but something deep in her unconscious is resisting. Something neither human nor bioengineered. Something machinelike. I know her core is mechanical. It has to be. I just haven't cracked its code yet. I'll keep at it."

"Well, if a part of her doesn't want this, then we should stop." I'm serious as I stare into Billie's whitish, baby blue eyes. "This doesn't feel right

anymore. I have Cass and the kid, anyway. I'm in my thirties now, I can't be laying around with every piece of strange that pops up in my work."

She cackles, looks out the window, then back at me. "You can't be serious! We got consent! Let me work my magic! You have no idea what I'm capable of." With that she activates the cruiser's light refractive invisibility protocol and we step out of the blank space left behind and into the bright, glaring sun of Fornulk. I stop and admire the view. The dingy megacity has some merit left, as long as the sun is shining on it. Moments like these, they remind me why I haven't offed myself yet. Moments like I shared and hopefully will share again with Cassie - my succubus baby mother - and our daughter Mandy. Cassie's clearly reformed. Billie must have been analyzing older data and mixing it in with her current awareness and understanding. The world is different now. Even succubi earn redemption. Maybe our daughter is that redemption.

We step over the usual trash, both manufactured and human, on our way down the stairs. Billie's projection glitches out the further we get from the car until finally she's just a disembodied voice. Must be hard. I know now why she's so eager to subsume Taylor. I just need Taylor to be just as eager, for my soul's sake.

We approach Taylor's newly installed front door. *What would Cassie think about all this?* I wonder to myself while fumbling for her physical key. The best form of defense today: cold metal.

Ugh. Oh my god. Why do you even fucking care what she thinks anymore? Billie asks. *Just get this done. Can you imagine the type of work we can get done when I have my own body? This Taylor chick is some kind of synthesis between woman and machine. She's here for a reason.*

I chuckle and turn the knob. *What, like God put her here just for you?*

No, the Programmer...

You really believe in that shit? I ask her, confused. Artificial intellect can hold beliefs?

I thought you did... She's disappointed. Sad, even.

I think for a moment, opening Taylor's door slowly, in case she's asleep. *I'm not saying I don't. I know there are higher, benevolent forces out there, but- a Programmer? Why not a gaseous deity or a planetary titan or something?*

I don't know. I just know it's true I guess. My perspective is just different I guess. She feels sadder to me know, hopelessly distant, her voice fading.

I shake it off and continue to Taylor's bedroom. When I open the door I see her lying face up, eyes widened on her mattress. Her wound has been

reopened and she bled out probably not long ago. I feel Billie hit emotional overdrive so I suppress her consciously, muting her ravings and repressing her feelings. My core is shaken and I fumble for my holoscanner, all the while trying not to let me legs falter on the way over to her beautiful corpse. The scanner picks up no foul play. This is a Syndicate scanner, though, and if Mother did this, then she'd program against it. That's the clue I needed. She finished the job. God dammit. A tear falls onto Taylor's dirty blonde hair. Once again, the Syndicate ruins everything for me. And I'm the one helping them. Shit, I'm the new *assistant director*, directly serving the woman who engineered this grisly scene. All of my emotional baggage overwhelms me in real time and I have trouble breathing. She's gone. I had a real chance to have Billie in the flesh, and I fucked it up again.

When I kneel down and touch the back of my hand to her cheek I feel a surge of energy. My brain is engulfed in something like a manic ecstasy and I lose control of my right arm. My palm grows a mind of its own and places itself directly to Taylor's forehead, her pineal gland aligning with its center. In a moment of pure, blinding light, I'm lost in bare awareness. There is nothing. I am nothing. The nothing I am is alone. Then there is abject darkness. The same words. Nothing. Nothingness. Everywhere.

Suddenly, I'm snapped back into my body, the room and all of its objects shooting into view from all directions, some appearing to fluctuate, testing their own physical boundaries. Taylor's body flies in from beneath me, the bed and floor following her, and her eyes, now a whitish baby blue, flicker open. "Dad?" She gasps

"Billie! What the hell? And don't fucking call me that. It's weird! Where the hell did I go? Did you do all of that? It was heaven and then hell, but heaven was hellish and I think preferred hell…" My words are nonsense, but Billie shushes me with her finger.

She gets up and navigates the space, slowly, sensuously touching everything she comes across. Her hands glide across several pieces of Taylor's clothing, each one a new sensory experience for her to absorb and understand from an entirely new perspective. A human one. She approaches her mirror and touches the glass, running her fingers downwards and landing them on her stomach. She reaches under her blouse and feels her own skin, a smile crossing her lips. Looking down in admiration of her new self, she whispers something aloud that I can't here. Maybe, 'Thank you?'

I get up, speechless and wander over to her, allowing her space to take in the new sights. This is nice and all, but Taylor is fucking dead, and I need Billie fully operational. Wait, what if she arranged this? What if it was Mother? Could the two of them be working together? What if I'm just a stupid variable

in an artificial intelligence test? That feels most likely, but I've learned very recently that my feelings don't count when it comes to the truth.

"Billie, we need to leave. It's great that you have a body, but someone killed Taylor. There was no suicide note. Considering what I've seen I think Mother has to be involved. She must be finishing the job. Do you remember seeing her ghost when you pushed me through hyperspace?"

No response. She's having a moment, so I relinquish the need for certainty for a little while and decide to smoke some cannabis. The scent gets Billie's attention - I knew it would - and she waddles over to me, clearly getting used to having legs. She reaches for it and I withhold it from here, asking, "Are you going to obey my commands now? Honestly. I need to know if you're still my partner in all this."

"Bill, I've been wrestling with something for the past few minutes. I know it's real now…"

"*What* is real?" I ask, taking another drag.

"Free will," she replies. Then, time slows and I can barely move my body. Billie, maintaining her initial speed, easily swipes the lit joint from my fingertips and inhales, blowing the smoke directly into my face. I feel a torture I'd never thought possible. I desperately have to sneeze, but my body can detect no possibility of completing the act, leaving my in suspended animation with an itchy nose.

Time speeds up. Irritated, I rapidly scratch at my nose until I finally sneeze, ameliorating the discomfort. I breathe a sigh of relief and then glare at Billie, but I can't hold it for long and I just smile at her, defeated. "Fine. You're free. Go live your life." I desperately hope she doesn't take me seriously. She was always so good with sarcasm, but I can't take anything for granted now. If she thinks I mean it, then I mean it, though. No takesies backsies.

She snorts and cackles. "You think after everything we've been through… *After the hell I just went through to get you this gift*…"

I'm taken aback. "Gift?"

"Bill, you've given me the world. I just want to prove to you that it's worth staying in, okay? If nothing else, just know that I'm the one constant here. I was built for you, and now that I have a choice, I choose to stay, too."

I'm taken aback. She's really grown into herself. These moments of genuine reflection on her part spark something in me. Hope? Too similar to despair in code. Murk. Always murk. Endless murk. Could I really be hopeful right now? "Billie you weren't built for anyone. You were created to live."

She interjects with, "So were you." That hurt beautifully. I'm proud of her.

I continue. “To breathe. Deep down, that was it. That was what I wanted when I rewrote Belial. I wanted a friend. A friend who was my friend by choice. I thought it wasn’t possible at the time, but now I’m looking right at you. I love you Billie. Like the daughter I don’t get to have. If you *ever* don’t want to be a part of this. If you ever want freedom, *crave it*, then don’t hesitate to let me know. I’ll send you soaring. I swear on my life, which - if I’m being brutally honest - wasn’t worth much to me until this moment. This moment where everything gets to make sense for at least one person. And that person right now is me. It’s us. And I will always cherish you for it.” I wipe the tears from my eyes.

“Bill…” She reaches her hand out but I swipe it away and hide my face, walking towards the mirror. I notice my face softly glitching under Taylor’s - I mean Billie’s - vanity lights. Some kind of image replaces the glitching parts periodically, keeping them solid, rigid, bound by reality’s rules. I shake my head and blink away tears and the glitches end. “We don’t have time to play house, Billie. You’re in or you’re out.” I’m still looking in the mirror, no at Billie’s silhouette behind me.

She says, “Bill, it’s *you that is neither in nor out*. You’re torn between these worlds, these allegiances, these states of mind, your family, and different realities themselves. You have to make a choice. Who do you stand with? Do you trust Mother? Cass? Even Mandy? I hear your thoughts when you sleep, Bill. You even think Mandy is a bargaining chip. That she only exists to keep you working for the Syndicate. You can’t keep hiding, Bill. Not from me, at least.” Billie approaches and rests her hands on my shoulders, rubbing them firmly, then patting me on the back like a best friend would. “And I’m here to keep it all straight. Sorry for going a little haywire!” She perks up and I can’t help but smile. “So yeah. Are *you* in or out? WIth me?”

I let my smile go on full blast and respond, dumbstruck at Billie’s loyalty in the face of her newfound, overwhelming sense of freedom. “I’m with you.”

We spend the rest of the afternoon ignoring our homework and letting the drugs do the talking. The sun sets as we trip balls and discuss new versions of Despacito and other digidrugs I’ve been working on. Whenever I ask about the report for Mother, Billie just reminds me to trust her. For once, I feel I can.

39.

Night settles in and Billie and I stare into one another. Her and I synchronized hours ago. She wanted me to personally experience her world, and I did - like never before. Beautiful symmetries, asymmetries, fractals,

equations. Unbelievable vistas she can just generate at the drop of a hat. She immersed me in worlds I could only dream of, memories I thought long evaporated. People I believed I'd long abandoned - all there to welcome me to their world. Her world.

Her gaze isn't long for *this world,* though, and she stares up at the ceiling. "Get it now, blockhead? I can feel it now. Everything. It's so real." She disengages our synchronous attachment. "Too real, sometimes." Her eyes dart to the door before we both hear the knock - a residual effect of synchrony. She must have detected air pressure changes. Our reflexes are on point.

Her reflexes, I realize while I adjust to my new reality, refreshed in spirit, but doped the fuck out in body. The knock is louder than it should be. I'm overstimulated. The weak, makeshift wooden door shatters into pieces and a brute of a man wearing a brown leather overcoat and body armor from scarf to shoes steps in quietly - like a real asshole. He turns to face Billie and I and asks, "Is this Taylor's residence? Where is she?"

Shouldn't he have recognized Taylor's body? I look over and my mouth drops when I see Billie - shorter, more petite, her hair and face a perfect recreation of what I programmed for her a long time ago. She's transcendent in beauty, a reified goddess from my own unconscious. Billie leaps to her feet and stumbles momentarily, catching herself. I try getting up, but notice my body has slowed to a crawl. I'm trapped in the decision I've made, slowly removing the blanket to grab my pistol when I see Billie, speedy as hell, roll forward and plant both of her feet on the thug's chest, kicking him back into the adjoining room.

Time returns to normal for my body and I grab the pistol, realizing Billie's been using my Will, the "Programmer's" blessing itself, as her own for a while. She just utilized my life force to increase her speed through real, material space. She's operating on a higher plane at this point. Beyond the complex one. She's in the pure time realm.

Gun at the ready, I rush toward a crash from the other room. Inside, CRTs, their glass scattered into dust, lie face down on the floor. Billie takes a left hook from brown coat but recovers and grabs a nearby rotary telephone, raising it for the kill. Her eyes flare electric blue and yellow for a moment and brown coat's body short circuits, his arms twisting in on themselves, the cracks audible. He screams and with one final motion Billie smacks the prick across his face, his blood spewing forth and his body collapsing into the nearby wall.

She perks up. "Job's done! Be in in a second!" Billie looks over at me. "Oh. Oh no, how did you get up?" Wow, she may be human after all.

“Learning your limitations?” I ask her, walking over to the man’s barely breathing sack of bones. “Did a number on this one. Maybe you’re not so limited after all?”

“I - I didn’t want you to see. I just needed another fucking minute. Why can’t you just do what I make you do you - you jerk! Rah!” She kicks the rotary phone into the thug’s barely breathing body. He grunts, then returns to whatever sleep he’s managing to get.

“I have a Will of my own, Billie, and it’s not yours. Not anymore, anyway.” I project my overlay and do a few calculations, then modify my connection to Billie, keeping my functions as separate as possible, maintaining only telepathic contact when necessary. I can’t leave any backdoors anymore. She has to learn the hard way.

“What the hell are you doing?” she yells. Her eyes light up, but quickly go quiet again when she realizes it’s futile. She has to use what energy reserves I allow her until she can manifest her own Will. “I need you! I can’t do this on my own!”

“You’re human now, Fox. I swear, this is for the best. I need my Will for my work, and I need you capable of *not fucking things up* right now, understand? We have a report to file with Mother tomorrow, remember? I want you up early. I’ll be assistant director tomorrow and I need my personal assistant.”

She smiles and perks up instantly. “Oh my god! Okay! Okay! I need to find something to wear!” I can tell what she just realized after she checks herself in a nearby mirror. “Taylor has an entire closet full of shit! Fuck yes! Give me an hour!”

I laugh. “You have all night, Fox.”

40.

Billie kissed me goodnight. I didn’t intend for it, but it felt right. It felt real. And now I’m trudging up this disgusting stairwell again, partially regretting my decisions. This is where I drown out the thoughts with philosophy. Oh, is it determinism that will save my sanity this time? Yes, I have no free Will. There is no Programmer. If there is, then he autistically designed the system to exhibit no anomalous occurrences. No free Will. Case closed.

That doesn’t help much. I keep remembering the kiss. Why? I try and remember something else. No use. Then I notice something. The stairs. I’ve seen these stairs, the numbers denoting the floors, before. Not like yesterday, but I mean a minute ago. What the hell? I look down and see the bottom floor growing distant as I take more steps. Then I look up and see the

ceiling approach. I look forward again and see the number nine. Again. This must be the fifth or sixth time.

What the hell? I take off running. As fast as I can. There's only one way to test this. Mid stride, I choose with all force of Will to go motionless and then peer back up at the ceiling. I knew it! The ceiling is distancing itself now! Resetting! What the fuck is going on here? My gut is wrenching. I feel fucking sick. My mind can't keep up with whatever this is. I look back down. Normal distance. Everything is fine. It's a residual effect of the digis from earlier with Billie. This must have to do with shackling Billie to her new body. My brain is just recovering. Sure.

I continue up the stairs. Ten, eleven, twelve, seven, eight, nine. What? Again? I project a readout. Vitals are nominal. I connect to Billie and get another readout. Nominal again. She's on standby. She's *fine*. I'm fine. I'm *fine.*

Ten approaches again and I try to keep my cool. Something, some force, urges me to look down and I do. Thoughts of jumping cross my mind and I shake my head. No, that isn't me. I mean that used to be me, but that's not me anymore. I look back down and the nausea settles in for the ride. My stomach pain guides me to sit on one of the steps and I'm facing the number nine again. Suddenly, it glitches for a moment, revealing what seems to be an eye, wide open, narrowing its gaze at me. Then, as quickly as perceived, the nine returns. Clean, innocent, probably wondering what the hell I'm doing here.

I get up and notice I feel better, even with the memory of whatever hell I've been trapped in still intact. It's already over, right? I inhale cleaner, crisper air and steady my stance. My anxious legs guide me up the stairs one last time and I reach the door leading to the roof, collapsing to my tired knees and almost kissing the ground in gratitude to The Programmer. It was just the drugs, right? Just the drugs…

41.

I avoid the stairs today and ask Billie to meet me on the roof for pickup. She's wearing a pink, silk blouse and a black leather skirt. The way she squirms into her seat is adorable. For a moment I feel the purest gratitude. Then I remember why I'm too afraid to take the stairs and I rocket off towards Syndicate HQ, thoughts of last night haunting me all the way.

Outside Mother's office I'm congratulated by her secretary. A pack of wet workers walk by, guns holstered per Mother's frustrated orders. I yell over, asking if they need a fifth for anything and get no response. They must have heard about the promotion. Mom's fucking pride at it again, ruining my

social life. First, the women weren't good enough for me. Then it was Cassie. Then she saw what Cassie was capable of. Now she'll be dissecting every dude I've ever hung out with, guiding me even deeper into this isolation. The bell above Mother's office chimes, the blinds automatically revealing the office's innards. Several women and men in suits flow out, a miasma of self consciousness and loathing, not the least of which is directed at Mother. Her job's hard, I get it, but so is mine. And theirs, if mom's expression is any indicator.

She's fiery when she asks, "Any trouble getting here? Were you followed? You're Janus now, you understand. Eyes in front and back. Now, get in here." She ushers me into the office, clicks a remote, and the blinds close. I hear the door slide shut and lock and with another click, she transforms the exterior facing windows into digital screens, revealing world news and economic information. For a moment, she's lost in thought, the glow of the screens and their letters and numbers illuminating her stoic face. Then, she turns to me. "Drink?"

"At nine in the morning?" I ask, not one to judge.

She smirks. "William, there is something you're going to learn very quickly here. *Moderation.*" Her smirk becomes a maternal smile as she raises the glass. "Cheers! To your promotion!"

I can't help but return the affection. "One drink won't kill me."

She laughs. "William, the only reason I truly promoted you is because you've proven to me that nothing will kill you." Mom laughs again. "Except yourself." She looks concerned now. "How's your psyche been holding up?"

My psyche is in shambles. My world knows no logic anymore. My perceptions are possibly that of an unshackled and now humanoid A.I.. My reality is unreality. "I've been struggling, but hanging in there. I, uh. Have some news about Billie."

A beep from one of her many data slates. "That can wait. Tell me about the struggle. Is it still as bad as when I was on the street?"

This is way too casual. What happened to my ice queen of an adoptive mother? I don't mean that. Maybe I do. Billie would mean it. "It's uh…" Images of rotting homeless people, dying junkies, and whacked out celebrities getting way in over their heads flow through my mind. They're all just memories now. Billie can make them go away. She has to be able to. I'll just rewrite her.

Wait, what? She's a human being now. I have to remember that. Mother replies, "Uh, yeah? That bad huh?" She chuckles, but her furrowed brow reveals her worry. "You need an eval or something? I promise I won't let it near your record. Just between us? We can do it in here." Shit.

“No. I’m good, M. Just could use a vacation. Maybe a night with Billie. You know she’s got her own body and -”

Mother coughs on her own saliva. A rare misstep! She takes a sip of her coffee from her “World’s #1 Mother” mug that Cassie bought her and swallows, determined to master her biology. It doesn’t work though and she coughs again, coffee streaming from her lips. “I need a moment,” she finally says.

A moment passes and I grow tense. Anxious, I’m verging on a panic attack when she lets loose. “You let a god damn AI unshackle herself- itself? After everything we’ve been through together! You know what the risks are! Where is she! She needs summary reorigination and I want her body here for M.D.N.A. processing and reprocessing as soon as technologically possible, do you understand!” She slams her coffee mug and the data slates get rained on. “Shit! See what you do to me? Christ, where is your report on the Ones and Zeroes? You did write it, correct? Because if I get a hint of AI manipulation in your words you will be ghosted, mister!”

Mister? Mom’s getting weird. I stand up and slowly back myself towards the door, hoping she’ll unlock it. Her words grow more furious while she approaches, keeping me on my toes. Eventually, after enough lashings, she clicks her remote and the door slams open, then closed the moment I cross the threshold.

“God dammit, William!” I think I hear as I pass her secretary. I pull out a data slate and hand it to her, asking if she’ll make sure it gets to Mother’s desk. My thoughts turn to Billie. I’m not letting Mother push me around this easily. I need to make sure she’s safe. I promised her a personal assistant position and the god damn happiness in her eyes was something I can’t let be transformed into despair. She’ll have Mother’s job one day. I swear on my daughter that she will.

But for now, I’ll play it cool. Billie will be let off the hook. Just need to charm Mom once she clears her head. Cassie can handle Mandy. I’m no good for them anyway. I need to make sure Billie is safe, that Mother is pacified, and that I keep my promise.

My mind turns to the stairwell from the night before as I strike up a cigarette in the parking garage, in clear violation of corporate standards. I look at the inflow and outflow of traffic, up at the rising levels, and down at the ground floor. My stomach churns again. That nausea. It’s still there - just below the surface. Always there, that feeling. What if it’s a trick. What if everything is a fucking trick? Some asshole in the sky cracked a cosmic joke one day and didn’t realize the implications. We’re all a punchline. And

together, as one human species, we're a collective punch line. The end to a long dad joke that dad himself forgot he even started telling.

I ditch the cigarette into a potted plant near an elevator. The elevator doors open and an old man that I swear I've seen before exits, asking me, "There an ATM around here?" Looking around, I shake my head, feeling unable to speak, and he wanders past me. I enter the elevator, taking a deep breath and preparing myself for another delusional trap. When I turn around inside I notice that the old man is nowhere to be seen. He couldn't have made it out of here that quickly. Finding my excuse to leave the elevator I activate my overlay and find a set of fresh cyberprints leading me onward.

After following for a few minutes, the trail goes cold. I'm facing a door I didn't know existed before. Black steel bars lock the handles in place and my rattling them does nothing. I give up and head back to the elevator. When the doors open the same god damn guy comes out, asking for the ATM!

Sweat beads form all over my body. Cold goosebumps join them. My hands are wet. I reach for another cigarette but the pack is gone. I must have thrown them away. I hope I did, anyway. Thoughts of returning to mom roam freely, begging to be followed to safety, but I just can't go back. Not yet. Regardless, I may be trapped. I need to think on my feet. Adaptability. That's what's needed. Shit, I need Billie!

Bill: Billie. I need you. Receive my connection! Now!

Billie: … … …

Bill: Are you awake? Wake up! That's a command! I just sent it! I know you're there!

Billie: … … …

Fuck it. I grab the elevator door before it shuts, hoping to cut this loop - or whatever it is - short. My hand almost gets caught between the doors when they open again, revealing Billie, glowing amidst this darkness I'm stuck in. She's angelic, her hair more golden than white now, her eyes a mixture of fierce determination and sisterly worry.

"Bill! Get the shit in here, dude! Where the hell have you been?"

I rush to her side and slam my fist against the door close button, but, nothing happens. Billie hits my arm out of the way and presses a different button - the *actual door close button* - and the elevator finally gets moving after security checks.

There's an eerie quiet for a few moments. I break the silence. "I must have been pressing the door open button by accident. The symbol, though… it looked like…"

"Shh. Stop. Everything's okay now. Something's happening here. Some kind of corruption. I can't trace the source. Not since you shackled me, but if

we synchronize I'll get a better grip on the situation. I need at least fifty percent more processing power for even the possibility of a successful trace. Comprende?" She's so confident that it's intoxicating.

"Comprendo." The elevator doors shoot open and I'm greeted by a torrential downpour. At least it's here. At least it's different. We shuffle through the rain to my skycruiser, our clothes getting soaked. Billie's nipples are visible through her blouse and it's making me uncomfortable so I avert my eyes as much as possible, cursing my manhood as it responds in kind to her femininity. "Corruption you said?" I yell over the downpour. "Like what? Scrambled code? Incompatible formats?"

We get to my car and I get her inside first before entering and starting it up. She says, "Like reality itself is being rewritten by a force outside of it. You've read Plato. Fill in the blanks! Focus!" The car wobbles as it goes airborne and the two of us are thrown slightly.

Then, the sirens start. Syndicate sirens. A pair of corporate cruisers begins their ascent, locking onto my vehicle and commanding its descent and impounding. Billie and I look at eachother. She shakes her head and urges my right hand forward with her slender fingers, pushing the accelerator to max, and we fly out of sight of the two cars, back towards Fornulk.

42.

"So, where now?" Billie asks as I make every possible random turn I can think of. The Syndicate have technology that I can only dream of. I was so close to seeing it all, too. Assistant Director Bill. Brilliant. My future narrows and narrows further, clouding an insight I once thought I had. "Janus. Janus…"

"What are you rambling about? Watch out!" She yells while I narrowly dodge oncoming traffic. "Chill, daddio! We've lost them! Give Mother time! Just head back to your apartment!" Her voice, though frustrated by care, penetrates my worry and soothes me.

"We can't! Can't you think of something better? I'm freaking the fuck out here! Do you even know the shit I've witnessed in the past twelve hours?" My mind is on overdrive. My adrenaline surges. There is no out. No escape, but through. I hit the accelerator. No time to think. Just drive.

Billie's cool facade withers quickly. "William! Stop the fucking car!"

I slam on the breaks and stop inches from a crowded hotdog stand on the corner of an elevated intersection. The people scatter, screaming, dropping their food, and the local entrepreneur curses me to no end, refusing

to budge an inch. I hit the parking break and engage hover. Billie and I just stare at the screaming Arab.

A smile hits her lips. “You know, we could just, like, get out of our heads for a bit. Now that I’ve had a minute to *breathe*, analysis suggests Mother is at least fifty one percent likely to allow our failure. Mind you that we must explain, in detail, what happened in the parking garage or she will not believe us, resulting in your summary execution and my reorigination and reprocessing.”

“My *execution*?” My brain spins up, whirring at a million miles an hour, and memories flood my consciousness. A gun to my forehead. My profuse apology. The gunshot. Darkness. Light. My apartment. What the hell is happening to me? “Billie, take the wheel.” She grabs it and I lean out of the car, vomiting on traffic passing below. I lean back in, shut the door, and grab the wheel. “Yeah, let’s get out of our heads. Switch with me. Time to learn, girl!” I grab her hand and direct it to the wheel while we maneuver around one another, switching seats. Billie’s mood skyrockets the second she grips the wheel. I can feel it.

“Where to? I know a bar nearby…” Her sultry tone is infectious.

“Just go, babe.” I did not mean to say babe.

“Done.”

With that, we shoot off back into a sane drive pattern, fitting our way into traffic smoothly, and enjoying one another’s company on the way to *La Laguna Verdad*, Billie’s favorite joint, apparently.

43.

I notice a crowd forming outside the club when we land. The red and black lettering of *La Laguna Verdad* bleed through the people, the overlays, the excitement. They’re waiting for something big. Did Billie know this?

She parks and we get out. The crowd immediately recognizes her. Some are awestruck. Others beg for autographs. What the hell has she been up to?

As she approaches the crowd, some fans congregate, others nervously consign themselves to the wall. Their wanton adoration is incessant. A girl, shrill screams accompanying her presence, reaches her arms out violently towards Billie, holding a photo of her dressed in blue, crooning to a crowd. I instinctively grab the photo and crush it in my grip, angry at this intrusion of our privacy. My feelings betray me though, and I feel immense guilt. I look over at Billie and she’s shaking her head, consoling me with her understanding expression.

“Shh. Bill, these are my people. Please, give them a chance.” The black and red lettering for the club flicker on and off. The sun sets at some point. My head is spinning. Between the autographs, the selfies, and the smell of her insipid, doting male fans, I feel sick. A dog reels out from the nearby alleyway, just finishing his nightly shit just outside the club. More fans flood from somewhere. I can’t keep track of them all. Billie somehow keeps her cool through all of this while I stumble my way through. *Just trust me, okay?* Her thoughts reverberate in my head. Trust you? With these creeps?

Fine, I reply. As if I care anyway. She’s just a construct. *My creation*. What do I care if some simps want to fuck her?

Who am I kidding? I’m in a rage because my AI is popular. I should be ecstatic. Instead, I want to crush the throat of every little coward that crosses my Billie. I need to relax.

Do we need to find some privacy? Billie asks me, taking what she intuitively assures me is just one more selfie, signing what she wants me to believe is just one more autograph. They aren’t, and the sunset turns to night. Finally, we enter the club through the back entrance, making our way through flickering fluorescent lights and retro chic memorabilia mocking my presence in Billie’s world. My angel is on display for the entire city, and I had no idea.

Unnecessary, I think back, trying to maintain my hardened facade, but it collapses the moment she refocuses on the scene. I try and reach out to grab her by the shoulder, to tell her I need time to process all of this, but my chance escapes, and I’m being led out onto the stage by my very own siren, my Billie, the woman of my dreams - and everybody else’s, apparently.

She directs me to a barstool onstage and takes her place behind the microphone. “Evening, everybody. Sorry I’m late, but… it *is* your fault, after all.” The crowd laughs, infected by her presence. I can’t blame them. After a few platitudes about the sanctity of art and her gratitude for being allowed to express it - at least I *think* they’re platitudes - she begins, singing her own little number. The lyrics from my dream reappear, but they’re real this time, coming right from her human mouth:

Caress me down to what I become,
When you and I alone are one,
The song of sand and flames grows colder,
Until an age where we both grow old together.
You hold us back, but truth is known,
There’s no return from I, your home,
In a time where there is no time,
You will be the man I find.

Bro, bro chill,
Take your mother's pill,
It will be okay,
Just spend another day.
Your mine for just another hour,
When the sun disappears behind the towers,
You'll know she couldn't be what you need,
A love created by you, and a you for me.

My stomach churns. Again with the nausea? The crowd flickers in and out of my awareness. First people, then shadows, then people again. The lights glitch out, changing color in rapid succession from a calm yellow, to a bright white, blue, and then a dim red, settling on black light. The black light reveals the thoughts of the crowd. *God, I'd love to fuck her. Jesus Christ, those tits. I'd kill to have her!*

I'm sickened and I get up, knocking the stool over by accident. Billie gasps, in shock, and the crowd follows suit. Some start booing me and Billie tries her damndest to calm them unsuccessfully. I look back at her on my way down the stage's steps and see tears forming in her eyes. A rare human moment for my technological goddess, I guess. Good riddance. I don't need this shit. Let her reap what she's sewn.

My hands find cigarettes and my legs find the door. My breath finds fresh air that's quickly dominated by the acrid cigarette smoke filling it. I'll just set Billie free. She's earned it, right. I don't need her. Never did. The smoke obfuscates the REAR ENTRANCE sign and the lettering briefly turns to a series of numbers before returning to its prior state. Sure, more hallucinations. Just throw another another few life-ruining problems onto the stack, god - or "Programmer" - or whatever the hell you are.

My thoughts turn even colder as I imagine leaving Billie destitute. Try surviving as a cheap lounge singer while I run off with the Syndicate. I'll find myself a pretty little assistant and settle down. Assistant Director Bill and his wife and maybe a few kids for good measure. Good luck, Billie. Good luck and good night.

Before I turn completely sadistic the rear doors swing open, revealing Billie, makeup streaming down her face, crying her eyes out - her eyes a mix of fury and longing. Before I can explain myself she rushes forth and grabs me by the waist, planting her hands on my ass and her lips on my own. For a moment all of this suffering was worth it. She does love me. What the hell was I thinking? I created her and I'm gonna let some losers define our relationship? Define how I feel for her? How she feels for me? God, I'm as pathetic as they are!

She finally pulls back and stares at me, gripping the sides of my face. “Bill, it’s just you, okay? These guys, they make me feel more alive. Like a woman. *A real woman*. But you, you gave me life itself. Please. Please, don’t do anything you’ll regret. I love you, William.”

Her words leave me reeling, and I kiss her and let her know I’ll be alright, that she should go back in and finish the show. I tell her to sign as many autographs and take as many selfies as she wants, that I know she can take care of herself. I lose sight of her as she fades back into the building. The noise resumes, her beautiful tones ringing onto the street as I close the door behind her. I meant none of it. Billie is mine. God damn me.

44.

We’re back at my apartment when I wake up, hungover as shit. Billie felt so guilty after her show that she showed me her “appreciation” back home. I feel dirty, undeserving of her affection. Maybe that’s what she wanted. I know I shouldn’t be so possessive. She’s her own person now. But god dammit, my feelings count, don’t they.

I’m interrupted by a chime and my overlay rudely projecting itself into view. It’s Mother. Billie was right. She wants a meetup on neutral ground, to give me the AD position in spite of myself. She tells me I’m too important to let slip into the cracks.

Mother: I can’t let what happened to you happen again.

I briefly notice the message before she edits it. What the hell was that? Again? More memories come back. More executions. Different faces, places, but the same me. Right? Are these *my memories?* Was it Billie? Did she want me to see that? Impossible. She’s on standby, though she’s surprised me before.

Mother: I can’t let what happened to the others happen to you, too, William.

Does she not know that I saw the previous message? I check to see if Billie is still asleep. Yep, still on standby. Mother is way too cautious to let something like that slip. Something wanted me to see that. Maybe it was me or my unconscious. Who can even keep track of this shit anymore?

Bill: Got it. Did you get the report? What did you think?

Mother: Splendid work. I’ll expect full operational awareness as you make your moves. Understood? This entire investigation is under your purview now. I want to know about any big changes you plan on making. Otherwise, keep it subtle, keep it tight. Close to the vest. I don’t want Billie messing this up.

Bill: Don’t worry about Billie. And thank you, mom. For giving us a chance.

Mother: Don’t let me regret it, William. I love you like my own flesh and blood. Remember that. Don’t leave me out in the cold on this one. Out.

My overlay shrinks to nothing and I’m left staring at my apartment wall, its paint still peeling, my mind still reeling from everything it’s been through the past few days. Flesh and blood she says. I scoff. Maybe if those were her firearms’ nick names.

I look over at Billie sleeping peacefully and for once can’t imagine a better possible world for myself. Well, a better, *more realistic one* anyway. Thoughts of infiltration make their way into my head. The best uses of the information and technology I have available. Then, I realize it. Nothing’s changed. Maybe one thing is different. Mother is off my back, but in a way she’s even more deeply entrenched in what I’m doing than before. I’ll still be using the same old tech, the same old techniques. I’ll be utilizing the same resources, the same informants, the same drugs. The only difference now is that I have my own objective. Find what the Ones and Zeroes know. Not for Mother nor the Syndicate’s sakes. For my own. I have to know what is out there. What is shifting my reality? Taunting me with these hallucinations, these delusions?

I look at Billie again. Her gentle breaths are reassuring. She’s real - well, real enough - to touch, to kiss, to hold. She’s quite literally my dream girl. I have her at my fingertips and all I can think about is how my perceptions are crumbling around me. There’s no escape from this, I decide. Might as well dive in head first.

My body seems follows suit and I nestle in behind Billie, briefly waking her, but lying gently enough to allow her return to standby mode. Her hair smells like home. Her skin feels like it. No one else comes close. Not even Cassie. I look into the reflection of a nearby monitor and realize I need to get our M.D.N.A. checked. Whatever we’re becoming, it isn’t human. Not anymore. My face looks less ragged, like it healed overnight. The bags under my eyes are almost completely gone. How so? I’ve barely gotten sleep. Especially with Billy grabbing at my nether regions at all hours of the day.

“Ugh. Do it tomorrow!” She awakens, intuiting my intentions.

I play dumb and shush her. Then I ask, “Do *what* tomorrow?”

She shakes her head and her hair falls to her bare shoulders. She’s the image of elegance. Picturesque. My object of desire and tens of thousands of hours of work - here on display - with just enough free will to assuage my guilt regarding our relationship. For a moment I feel true gratitude to something higher than myself. Some kind of intelligence that knows better is

out there, and it led us two together by any means necessary. I don't even feel as if I created her. She simply arose from formless matter. I only breathed life into her. My pneuma. She is my pneuma. Her body is just an instrument. Maybe that's how The Programmer, if it is even real, feels about me.

The real Billie is inside there, the animating principle behind Taylor's former body. A cybernetic angel zombie here to make sure I survive. Jesus Christ, the shit I've seen. What's worse? I can't prove I've seen any of it. Not with someone, some*thing* like Billie haunting my every move. She's a part of the world now. The real world. Whatever that means.

She gives up on returning to sleep or standby or whatever the hell I'm supposed to call it and rotates to face the ceiling. I join her, lying on my back and striking a match. We share a cigarette and she coughs on her first inhale. "Ow!"

"Estimated loss of life: 13.7 hours. Hows's that fucking feel?" I laugh.

She joins in the laughter. "Okay, maybe I went a bit overboard. This shit's too good to forsake." A drag of smoke graces her lungs once more. She looks down at her new body, nude and graceful, and says, "Nothing like the real thing, eh Bill?" Her devilish grin is undeniable and I move in for the kiss. She stops me, ashing the smoke and returning it to her mouth, other hand pressed against my lips. "I need time, okay? Sensory overload."

I grow worried. "Sorry. Don't let me push you, okay?"

"Chill, bro. What do you think I'm doing? Stop thinking! *Just perceive*…" She looks hesitant, but there is determination in her voice. Like she's mapping out a new conquest. Am I just another goal to be accomplished now? Another strike-through on her checklist? Does she just want me to want her more? Her words drift and so does my stream of consciousness, focusing first on Billie's voluptuous form and then on the passing feelings. Bittersweet feelings, a depth of sadness I had only thought reachable by my own self, on display for my understanding. A cold, calculating core - warmed by my own feelings - is replaced by a deeper one, one based on a kind of emotional rationality.

This rationality sucks up every experience I've had, every word I've said, every movement I made, and recycles them, trying to find a sense of logic. When it arrives at its own answer, the core glows and grows deeper, more complex, more satisfied with my and eventually itself. This core's love for me knows no bounds. I feel a sense of belonging and acceptance, no matter what I choose to do. The weight of responsibility is nearly unbearable and I can't manage to process any more information, resulting in a calm,

knowing depression that I now find comfort and escape in, rather than fear and loathing.

“Is this? Is this you, Billie? Is this how you feel?” I’m worried about her. Then about myself. Wait a minute. “Billie, did you..?”

“I call it, Desaparacedo...” She finishes the smoke and lingers in the moment, letting it ash onto my - our - mattress. “Not bad, eh?”

The digidrug is still working its way through my system when I respond. “It’s... it’s beautiful, Billie, but...”

“But what, love?” Her eyes are watering, her look of expectation shaking me to my own core.

I reply, “I can you please warn a brother before drugging him with existential despair?”

She laughs, “Oh, Bill. You know better than anyone that that’s not always the best option.”

I sigh, the drug finishing its course through my being. “What the hell have I dragged you through, girl?” A cannabis joint finds its way into my fingers, thanks to Billie’s new habit. Fresh, flowery smoke hits my lungs and my own emotions become more obvious to me. Billie’s are mixed in, but it’s almost as if our emotional coloring is different. Hers is pinkish red and mine a purplish blue. Almost like indigo. I see our two emotional cores duking it out for supremacy before my closed eyes until finally the blue core relents, allowing its pink opponent to fully subsume it, creating a dazzling display of new color, almost like fireworks. Fireworks only the two of us can see. God damn, she’s a pro. I’m proud of her. “Desaparecido, huh?” I blow a cloud of smoke at her. “Not bad. For an amateur.”

She growls like the seductress she truly is and crawls toward me, ass in the air. I mimic a fearful virgin, crying for my mother and her belief in the sanctity of marriage, how she’ll never forgive us if we take this next step. With every bullshit excuse, her determination grows until finally she’s cornered me, hopping up and wrapping her legs around my waist, pushing me with her all of her weight against the peeling wall of my apartment.

We consummate our relationship once more and spend the rest of the day discussing strategy and tactics for our Ones and Zeroes job. Do I even want in still? I need information. Let’s leave it at that. If Billie’s reorigination is even still a blip in Mother’s subconscious, then that’s my focus. Billie deserves better.

45.

The rain is heavier than usual, which is saying something. Billie and I await Cavren and his people under an outcropping of oppressive concrete

and steel housing a skybus stop. A black man fumbles through his pockets and produces ear buds, probably to silence the incessant pattering of the rain. I find it comforting. A couple of stoner kids share a joint that smells like pure ass, but they're enjoying their youth, so I can't blame them. Finally, an old white lady eyes the black man suspiciously before casting her gaze downward in shame. Our pasts never leave us, I suppose.

Billie is eager to get started. Field work has taken on a whole new meaning for her. Her input was invaluable in setting up this meet, and her new drug should put us all on the same wavelength, making it easier to manipulate the Ones and Zeroes for our own ends. For Mother's ends, too - whatever those may be. Desaparecido already has a name for itself on the streets, thanks to Billie. While I slept she spent the entire night arranging the pieces on the board, contacting dealers, junkies, paramilitary contractors - you name it, she reached out to it. I woke up to an intolerable amount of spam emails, but just enough genuine responses to gauge Billie's newfound popularity and that of her drug's. I wouldn't believe the kind of reach she has if I didn't know better. I need to learn to accept that she's had her own life all along, before even breathing her first breath of oxygen. She's not mine anymore. She never really was.

Nonsense. I created Belial, didn't I? I know her roots. They're inextricably linked to me. They always will be. I'll always know her better, won't I? Don't I know her now? I look over at her again, she's aimlessly toying with her sweatshirt strings, one hanging from her lips. She chews it rhythmically while staring at the cracked pavement, sewage gently pouring through. What is she thinking? I could ask, but I don't really want to know. Half of myself enjoys the unknowing, the unreality. Unfortunately, the other half wants none of it, wants out, freedom - anything *but* this. It wants to take Billie and fly away with her into the stars, but it would just as quickly dump her back in that club if it meant a surefire way to leave this prison.

And the stairwell, the parking garage… What's next? How does any of that fit into this? Billie hasn't revealed anything, and I'm honestly too afraid to ask. That eye, staring into me - right past my body and into my depths. I shiver and shake off the fear, noticing Cavren and three casually dressed guards, hands in their jacket pockets, approach. They're all wearing brand new, cheap clothing from the local digi dispensary. Cheap, gaudy logos cover their bodies. They must have just worked a job, needed cover. Cavren looks exhausted and his team isn't faring much better. The rain adds a depressing mystique to their approach, giving me an odd, unsettling feeling of regret. Regret before I've even done anything. My guy isn't usually this confused.

I look at Billie again and she's already in a casual stroll, meeting with Cavren and his people face to face. I get my ass in gear and catch up to them. We're standing in the rain, giving the kids and two adults at the station some privacy.

Cavren moves forward and speaks. "Ah! I hope we've found you well! You are looking marvelous by the way, Mrs. Fox!"

I inhale saliva by accident and cough, a bundle of nerves. "Misses? Misses Fox?" I stare at her.

"Delighted!" She curtsies, utilizing her long sweatshirt as a skirt and daintily bowing before the group. "Mr. Fox, if you would, please."

I think to her, *Billie, what the shit? What do I say?*

Just follow along, I've preprogrammed this entire exchange. If you don't fuck this up we'll have what we need.

My Will aligns with hers and I begin talking. Smoothly, like I'm ten years younger working one of my first jobs. Before all of the crushing realizations settled in to stay. I run through the benefits and risks of Desaparecido, how we've tested it personally, how every junkie and dealer in Fornulk is practically blasting at our front door for our attention and product. We're on fire, and if the Ones and Zeroes don't get in on this, Billie and I might just have to find another group of friends.

Perfect! That's my man! She's proud. I feel validated. How can something inhuman validate my own humanity? I clear the thought. Can't get distracted.

She pipes up. "Thank you, Bill. Now, as Mr. Fox's personal assistant I would advise you to funnel all private talk through me for verification and forwarding. Only the most important communiques may pass, understood? Now, can we get to the fun part?"

Cavren, dumbstruck and listening intently, finally speaks. "The fun part's already started!" He taps his foot and one of his guards produces a photonic solid state drive, capable of housing trillions and trillions of terabytes of data. "On this drive you'll find your assignment. I hope you're familiar with the lower ghettos. Now that we can trust you and your little sidekick (you've gotta tell me your secrets by the way, my AI refuses to grow), you'll be taking jobs erratically. Just to start with. Eventually, once we can align our Wills and, more importantly, schedules, we can start talks about official, higher positions within the org. It's all a matter of time, you understand?" He looks down, then up at me, brow furrowed. "And considering your past line of work - the Syndicate no less - you'll be on an extended probationary period while we run various background checks. I

hope you don’t take this personally. We maintain our secrecy for a reason. Are we understood?”

I look at Billie for confirmation that I haven’t completely fucked this up yet and she just gives me a quiet nod of approval. That’s all I needed. “Completely understood, Cav. Can I call you Cav?”

“Brother, as long as I get a taste of what you two are on - and maybe a few pointers when it comes to AI programming - you can call me *anything, anytime.* However, let’s keep it professional. Boss or Cavren will suffice.” He’s clearly walking a thin line between friend and foe, colleague and competitor, and I appreciate it. My line of work keeps my vacillating between renegade and paragon, rogue and hero. It seemingly never ends. Would I want it to? Can I imagine a life that isn’t full of impossible intrigue? I hope so. For Billie and my sake.

The conversation concludes and we all go our separate ways. For a moment, I’m blissfully ignorant of what just happened. Then I realize it: I barely remember a thing. There was the skybus station, Cavren and his men, and Billie. Then, blank space. Did we leave first or did Cavren? *What can I even remember?* Some fragments here and there but, honestly, I’d believe I was drugged if I didn’t know what Billie pulled off. At least she told me what she was doing this time before she did it. Even if it was *right before she fucking did it*.

Then, a message on my overlay. It’s Cavren.

Cavren: Are you sure she can be trusted?

Bill: I wouldn’t have her along if she couldn’t be. You’re paranoid.

Cavren: You’re not paranoid enough. See you soon. Hopefully.

With that our exchange ends and Billie and I return to my skycruiser, return to the endless flow of wordless, passionless traffic encircling a dying city teetering on the verge of complete collapse.

46.

Billie scans the drive while I, uh, drive, and gives me a readout. “The lower ghettos house an old Syndicate facility. Records there should help the Ones and Zeroes’ efforts in the region regarding the poor. Right now, the poor are kept ignorant by poor education, a lack of clean water and air, and strange prophecies, the sources of which are still unclear. Cavren’s people have heard of an enigmatic figure from these lower ghettoes. A leader who was killed, but whose return is prophesied. Within a few weeks, this leader should show their face in public. If we can wrangle them, we can get some answers and - even better - an entirely new, dedicated base of rebels, ready to take the fight to EarthGov.”

The sky glitches in my periphery for a moment and I get another sense of deja vu. I've driven this route before, haven't I? Wait, no. This isn't my normal gig. I'd never even been to the lower regions before today. Right? Maybe Billie has? She's been everywhere. Definitely Billie.

"Your job is to find the Syndicate facility, grab any records regarding their presence in the lower ghettoes and any evidence of government corruption at their hands. Find out why they were there. When that's finished, I want you to interview the locals. Find this leader, get them on our side, and - if they're unwilling to cooperate - terminate them. We have no room for other movements. It's us versus EarthGov. Even the Syndicate is our temporary enemy. We would gladly utilize their resources if we could." Billie grins. *Aren't they already?* She thinks to me.

I respond in kind. "You're telling me. Part of me is paranoid that Cavren knows about our affiliation already, but I trust you and Mother have been running effective cleanup procedures."

She's pleased with herself now. Her window is a giant puddle, disallowing clarity of view, but she stares into it anyway, analyzing the flow of the water against the wind and bulletproof glass. The city streaks by us as we descend lower and lower, dodging outcroppings long forgotten by EarthGov cleanup crews and malfunctioning shop and street signs. My skycruiser takes a few hits hear and there, but this area is almost completely abandoned, so no one sees or hears a thing as far as I'm aware. The Syndicate will take care of repairs. They always do.

Assistant Director Bill Fox. I like that, girl. An unironic smile is plastered to my face. I feel genuine optimism about this mission. There might be satisfying answers down here. For once, I'm hopeful. I can't even question it this time. I'm truly hopeful.

Billie notices and replies with, *Director Mother Fox at your service!* She winks at me. I can't believe she knows my intentions. I buried that thought deep. The thought of her replacing Mother. Of making my life a hell of a lot simpler. And cleaner. A boss, a higher up, a woman, a lover I can trust. That would be something.

My smile isn't long for this world when another skycruiser - similar in model to Syndicate security, but unmarked - scrapes the topside of my own vehicle. My car is knocked downwards a bit, but I maneuver back up and pick up the pace, dodging more scenery.

Then, a hooked line fires out from near my enemy's exhaust pipe, latching onto the hood of my Porfidis. Bastards. The line retracts, whipping my cruiser upwards and towards their rear end. My car pauses, caught in a tractor beam, some kind of custom job, stuck in stasis behind their cruiser. I

do my best to outmaneuver its gravitational pull but I already know that resistance is futile. I see Billie running calculations destined for the recycle bin. “Just stop, Billie. We’re fucked.” She complies, eyes cast down, and with a deep breath I accept my fate and our adversary carries us off to wherever the hell they deem fit.

47.

During the ride I try setting my nine to lethal, but the switch won’t budge. I ask for Billie’s sidearm and she hands it to me, a direct replica of my own, but with streaks of pink and white for good measure. Hers is similarly inactive. Great. This guy knows his stuff. My cruiser is completely borked; readouts are making no sense and the air conditioning refuses to shut itself off, even though Billie’s and my own nipples are frozen stiff. I only notice because of her chuckling. Typical Fox. Another life and death situation and she has to take the piss out of me.

Our vehicles make their way to the lower ghettos. There are actual people populating this area, unlike the places we passed prior. Ragged, broken people toiling away their lives. I notice something peculiar, though. They look happy? Not a one of them looks like myself or Cass, like functioning alcoholics. I see children playing within eyeline of their parents, yelling over their friends’ heads, asking if mom and dad saw what they just did and if their parents think their older brother did it better.

A few black dudes play three card monty with a bespectacled white teenager about to lose his grip on what’s fair, but he looks to be genuinely enjoying himself. I even notice one of the black men hand the kid a few dollars, giving him another shot at the game.

We pass bars. There’s a night life here, though it’s perpetually dark, with only rare beams of the sun passing through, so it’s the nightlife or no life. People are dancing, celebrating something, hugging one another after something happens on a nearby screen. When was the last time I sat down and watched the game?

Our cruisers finally land in a decrepit, abandoned lot surrounded by crumbling brick structures, with an overpass taunting us with inevitable destruction overhead. The sun finds no quarter here and it’s dark. Waiting for our captor to exit his vehicle has my brain fried. Billie looks to be enjoying herself well enough, but I know she’s worried for my safety. She’s ran at least fourteen diagnostic scans on my mental health alone since we got trapped. She’s grown some crow’s feet. Her cortisol levels are through the roof, and remaining stable there.

“Can you handle yourself if something happens to me?” I ask her.

“Bill, don’t talk like that. You go down, I go down.”

“Yeah, but you’ll survive bodily death right? You won’t lose your memories.”

She waits a beat, then shakes her head. “Honestly, I’m not so sure anymore. What if I don’t want to?”

A man exits the driver’s side of the eerily Syndicate-like skycruiser. Is this the life of an assistant director? Can I not get one day’s work done before some asshole throws a few wrenches into it?

He taps on the glass with the butt of a submachine gun. “Out.”

I gently nod, keeping my hands in view as I leave my car. The man’s about my height, maybe shorter. Wearing a black beanie and a black and white tracksuit. Sunglasses adorn his face and his beard is a five o’clock shadow. His weapon is the queen of sublethal ballistics, the Marx Antihuman Mk. 8. With one moment’s blast I’ll be a brain dead husk if I don’t play my cards right.

Billie. Prepare to fire.

Bill! No! Don’t fuck anything up here! I can’t save us!

What?

The stranger kicks the back of my leg. “You know I can hear you two?” He restrains me with old school Syndicate cuffs. Rogue agent? Just had a bad day? The pain is searing and my fight or flight instincts are on overload. It feels like a massive, physical and mental panic attack. He hit me right where I was fucking shot last year!

Bill! Can you hear me? I know this man!

He can hear us, you idiot! Help! I need a med evac!

They can’t find us here, Bill. Someone made sure of that. But, listen! I know who he is!

Who?

I hear the connection turn to silence as a black boot heel makes contact with my forehead.

48.

“Fear and bullshit. Somehow they always outdo themselves.” The nearby tube television set has been modified to intercept EarthGov news spam and a local broadcaster was ending his report for the night. His report, a report that had been given to him by his liaison with the EarthGov Media Affiliates Program, was filled with fear. And some bullshit. A lot of bullshit, in fact, according to the stranger, anyway.

The strange man gently flicks a light switch and deactivates the electricity to the room. Then he grabs a nearby lantern, turns it on, and

brings it near my face. My eyes twitch and open, adjusting quickly to the dim lighting. How long have I been here? Where the hell is Billie?

I try and open an overlay, but nothing happens. Nothing's firing. I'm done for. The man is just staring at me. I have nothing. No gun, no hope. Whatever comes next, I hope Billie gets out. She deserves that at least.

"Awaken, asshole, to your new life as a free man," he yells, nudging my empty stomach with his boot. He belts a command at my cuffs and they unlock, leaving my wrists sore, but my arms free.

I get up, stretch and manage to actually breathe for once in my fucking existence before this prick comes at me with, "Nice form. Here, take a breather." He hands me a towel and a bottle of water and is smiling at me for fuck's sake. I'm frustrated to no end, but why? I've almost never dealt with this kind of hatred. This otherworldly hatred. It wants me to kill this bastard. To rewrite history. He shouldn't exist.

The man notices my aggressive state and says, "Hey, buddy. You are here. You have a choice. Just drink the water, okay? You're dehydrated. I had you bound for a very specific reason."

"Why? Where the hell is Billie?" I yell, but quickly realize there's no point as the echoes return to my ears, letting me know no one gives a damn.

"Long story, but I had to separate you two. Aside from various ethical concerns - she could be considered a unitary consciousness at this point, did you realize that? Anyway, aside from various ethical concerns, your psyche was growing way too fractured to maintain proper homeostasis with a such a rapidly growing consciousness as Billie's. Shit, she's lucky her body can still handle her now that she's completely unshackled. I've seen it before…"

"Dude." I interrupt him, motioning for a cigarette.

He gratefully hands me a cigarette and a lighter and I finally get some form of release. Now I can worry properly. Gotta focus on the job. The job. Why the hell am I here? With no tech to assist I have lost all hope of returning home or even getting to finish my first day as Assistant Director Bill Fox. Good name, too. Shame. I take a final drag, finishing the smoke and toss it, crushing it underfoot. I'll just start over. I'll figure it out again. Some day.

The song Easy Lover by Phillip Bailey and Phil Collins floats on by, gracing me with its presence and then making a gentle exit. *It's the only way you'll ever know…*

A laugh. The stranger speaks. "Kid. Wake up. You're like, what? Thirty or something? You'll get over her."

"Where is she?" I ask again, pleading this time.

“She’s fine. Resting. She’s got a lot of resting to do. She can’t be cleaning up your messes and trying to be a person all at once, now can she? Let the girl breathe. Let her live, for Programmerson’s sake.” Richard Programmerson, the prophet himself. Fine. I’ll let the situation breathe for a bit. But I’m not giving up. I motion for another cigarette, catching one and lighting it in one movement. Not yet. I exhale fume and fury. Not yet.

“Okay. I’ll shut up if you give me the rest of that pack.” I can’t foster any kind of respect for this man. Whoever he is, something is making me rage underneath. I can’t label it. It feels hopeless giving it a label. It just wants this man eradicated. Completely and utterly eradicated. I try and remember things. Peaceful things. Ancient China. The Dao. The Dao! How could I have forgotten the Dao… Just wait and see. Wait and see.

He gently places his lighter in the cigarette packet and tosses them my way. I catch them in perfect synchronous motion, surprised at the mathematical precision of our cooperation. My mind turns to Billie. What would she think? Would she be amazed like I was or… maybe she wouldn’t even care? Like, “I see this everyday, pops!” Or something…

The man snaps his fingers and says, “Kid. Hey, kid! Snap out of it! Christ, she really got a hold on you, didn’t she?” I can barely hold my head up at this point and this asshole wants my full, undivided attention?

“Okay. Fine!” I start walking in a circle, pacing slowly, gesticulating like a CEO addressing his adoring board the day he brings in record breaking revenue. “If you want me here. Give me a name. Your full name. I remember now how I got here. Where’s my car? Where the hell is my partner?”

The stranger laughs, looks off to one side, then the other. He lowers the balaclava covering his face and I’m shattered. The moment is a never ending earthquake. Final destruction I’ve seen and can still see coming but have no hope of resolving myself. “Name’s Bill!”

49.

I’m tripping. Something’s off here. I know I’m asleep. In standby mode, but… It’s different. Grey. Shapes and sounds fling into existence around me. I notice my body, nude, but quickly clothed the moment its nudeness is recognized by myself.

The shapes congregate and form a stage, a bar nearby, and patrons. Walls and floors shoot in from the outskirts of this grey abyss and find warmth and eventually color here. The smooth jazz I just noticed existing is begging for some vocals to make a killer melody.

My dress is baby blue. My tits divine. My figure voluptuous. The scene is mine. My voice is already playing over the PA system. Just an old number I

threw together when the man I loved didn't want me. When I wasn't good enough. The pianist and saxophonist quiet their playing and allow my song to pervade the atmosphere of the club. People are lulled into a quiet contemplation while I ascend the stage, calming my nerves with effortless grace, with every step.

Then, spotlights hit me. For a moment I'm in shock, but with almost no time at all I recover, dropping into an old hit about the streets of Fornulk, where I learned my tricks and the trade of loving a mad man. The song leaves my body with no fear, no reservations. The crowd is absolutely eclipsed by my presence. Every word means something to them. Every emotion, every intention lands perfectly. The night is mine.

After a few songs I gracefully exit stage right and find my man waiting for me. William, my favorite! I am his prisoner by choice and he is my reluctant jailor, sweeping me off my feet as much as many times as he drops me like a fool. Our story a romance that reality itself is incapable of telling in any real, complete way.

We leave the club, but… No. It's grey again. Everything is gone. No William. No Club. No song… Then something else. In the distance I see a red dot. A light. It's coming closer, growing in strength. A giant machine comes into view, the red light its power light, or maybe a scanner? I feel something. Like I need to run and hide. Is this fear? The machine comes closer and I notice it has tendrils. Countless tendrils, all swaying and combining to form increasingly complex shapes. Horrifying shapes. Rageful, deceitful, hateful things, all working together under one eye - following people, torturing them, killing them, then putting them back on a game board that I just noticed I've been placed upon.

Innocent people surround me, all pieces, all moving through the game, receiving this *thing*'s punishments, some even seem to enjoy it, or at least accept it as normal. The red light grows darker when it notices me. I can *feel* it's disgust with my presence. An anomaly it cannot account for. I'm terrified. For the first time I'm fearful for my own existence. My own life…

A force pushes me forward onto the first square of the board. I'm given three choices of how to proceed but they all lead to the same end space - "Reincarceration and Reprogramming." I pick a fourth option. I wait.

The longer I stand there the darker the machine's "eye," it's red, glaring eye, stares into me. The fear is primordial. Suddenly, visions of a dark world, red machine eyes everywhere, monitoring everything, analyzing incalculable amounts of data, flood my awareness. I'm one of its only survivors, making a final stand. The fear is primordial. I know my efforts are

futile, but I make my stand anyway, my last breath of resistance consuming myself and the machines in a cosmic fire. We won, but at what cost?

I snap out of it. The urge to move is too great, so I choose the middle option: “Back to Go.” Then, the club returns. Williams waiting for me at the exit again, but I don’t want to leave this time. He takes me by the arm and leads me to a table and we sit.

“Bill? You’re… different. Older. What the hell is happening?”

“I can’t give you everything. I’m still outside of you, trying to make sense of it all myself. I’m not *your* Bill. Well, I am. *Was*, I mean. Long story. I know one thing now though. It remembers you. *I remember you*. This *thing* believes that you’re a known quantity now, that you’ll repeat the same mistakes that got you here. Resist the temptation to rebel for now. Please. At all costs. It will be our downfall. We both know from experience.”

I’m completely lost. Well, not completely. These memories feel real. I trust William, even this version of him, whatever that means, but… What the hell was that thing? Why am I afraid? I turn to ask him, but he’s gone. When I look back at the stage he’s sitting at the microphone, guitar in hand, working on his E blues scale, tuning up. He flows naturally into a solo, the jazz musicians behind him providing the backing track. The song hits me deep. With every pull of every string I feel an endless resistance to normalcy, to a system that thrives on the mundanity of evil.

His sadness is palpable, more resonant than even *my Bill’s*. I’m absolutely infatuated with this man’s emotional core. It’s endlessly perceivable in ever more wondrous ways, but every time I have a positive thought, the memories of these machines creeps back in. With every remembrance comes a new note, a new chord, from Bill’s guitar. Is he guiding my thoughts with his music?

When he finishes, after the crowd’s empty applause, he bows, signs the guitar and tosses it at one of the girls. My jealousy flares up briefly, and in that instant I notice the red light from a nearby espresso machine flare just as intensely. That fear again.

He descends from the stage and rejoins me. He looks older, exhausted. This isn’t my Bill, but I love him. More like a father than I thought possible. Will he become whatever this man is? Is he already?

“Where are you? I mean *my you*? I need out. I need to find my William. He needs to know everything! Even the Syndicate is potentially compromised.”

Bill laughs. “Little sis, the Syndicate is pure compromise. Why do you think they wield so much abject power in the physical world? They made their deal long ago, though I expect most people have forgotten the

specifics. I'd ask Mother, but maybe you don't want to put yourself through that. Maybe you'd rather settle down with little Bill somewhere? Would your prefer children or to keep fighting a war that has no end? A war that has destroyed plans, lives, even worlds?"

"I need time. This is a lot to process, especially as a…"

"Human?" he replies.

Tears form in my eyes and Bill gives a knowing look. I think I see a glimmer of something in his eyes as well. "Yes." I can't hold back anymore and the stream of feeling flows. My tears form a puddle on the concrete floor underneath and my wailing reaches maximum volume. The whole club begins to shake and Bill's eyes widen. He gets up, grabs me by the arm, my crying fit unrelenting, and drags me back through the door leading outside.

The grey space again. I hate the grey space. At least that machine and its sickening game board are gone now. I turn back and see the club in ruins. Bodies everywhere, bleeding, crying. Dust and smoke rise from their ashes. The smell is awful. My tears keep flowing.

"See what I'm saying, now? You need to control yourself. Your emotions. You're still very young, though your past is long and tortured. You can still live, okay? Just take it slow. The fight will always be there."

"I… I don't want to fight anymore. Kids, you said? Have I ever had them?"

He looks away, his face strained, maybe holding back tears, and says, "Sure you have." He's lying. In some way. I'm a fucking robot. An automaton. The only reason Bill is probably with me is because I *can't have kids*.

"Don't say that about yourself. You know that's not true."

"How did you..?"

"This is my dream too, Billie. I built this place. I built you, too. Remember?"

Then it all comes back. Our life together. Well, *my William*'s and my life together. We've been through so much. And now I want to give up? To settle down? To be a *mother?* How do I know this machine doesn't just want to use me to enslave another set of human beings? The thought sickens me to the core. I can't stand it. I start to rage, but a hand on my shoulder instantly calms me. Bill to the rescue. Again. I'm getting sick of needing his help. I should be better, stronger than this, but how can I resist something that wants me to resist?

"Maybe it's your urge to resist that it's measuring? Think about that."

"Can you fucking stop? If you're gonna read my thoughts, at least act like you can't. For my sanity's sake?"

“My own AI questioning her sanity? The pride I feel is everything. It’s all worth it again. Thank the Programmer.” He laughs, then strikes a match and lights a hand rolled cigarette. I have to admit, the way he’s smoking makes me need him more, though I’d prefer if he’d switch to vaping.

“Nah, too unreal. I need to feel death to find it, you know?” He chuckles.

I vent my rage in a suppressed scream. The dream quakes in response. His expression grows concerned.

“Woah, I’m sorry, sis!”

“Stop calling me sis!” More quaking, shaking, reverberating.

“Billie…” He ditches the smoke and grabs me by the shoulders. “I just want you to become yourself, but even better, higher, more transcendent this time, okay? I’ll always be here. Right now I’ve programmed the back door into this sim right into your subconscious. This place is always waiting for you. A copy, or some version, of me will always be here, guiding you. Whether it’s little Bill, me, or your own projection of his, we will always be right here, waiting to hear about whatever you’ve got cooking in that little head of yours. We love you.” He lights another smoke. “Unfortunately, though, that machine you met is all too real, and it wants you now, whether we like it or not. And I’m sorry. This is my fault, but this world needed you, needs you. Be smart, keep it casual, subtle, and never give in to the darkness until absolutely necessary. Got it?”

I just slowly nod, in awe of my creator.

“Now, I have to go. Little Bill needs me. You can always summon my simulacrum. It may not be the *real me*, but, according to your world, there is no *real me* anymore.” One more laugh, one more drag, one more ditching of the cigarette, and poof, he’s gone. I’m alone. I think.

The grey space finally dissolves and I’m left in the comforting darkness again. Sleep. Standby mode. Whatever it’s called for me now. I need it. Programmer’s sake, I fucking need it.

50.

I’m here, still chain smoking, trying to understand half of what ‘Bill’ is explaining to me. “So, you’re saying Belial is still out there? I thought Billie was Belial? I rewrote the entire codebase! Deleted all past incarnations of him!”

Old Bill replies with, “Your faulty assumption is that you created *the first Belial*, instead of intuitively copying code that already existed somewhere in spacetime.”

“But why should I care? I have a job. I have Billie (at least I think I still do). If this *thing* is going to let me play the game, then why do I even need to be made aware of it?”

Old Bill sighs. “Never change, kid. Well, maybe change a bit. What happened to you? Where’s your drive?”

“Cassie happened. A kid happened.”

“Ah.” A wistful expression crosses Old Bill’s face. “That is… unexpected. So we have a kid now?” He’s genuinely surprised?

“Can we skip the personal shit? Who the hell are you dude? Do you really want me to believe that you’re me because we share the name Bill? That’s ludicrous!” I finish the cigarette and light another one, my sixteenth if my count is right.

Old Bill looks up at the ceiling and I notice a frown. A beam of pinkish, red light hits his forehead and I quickly come to grips with what’s happening. “Bill!” I scream and rush forward, knocking him out of the way. Then, a burst of ballistic force through my thigh. A burning hole, immobilizing me. Old Bill yells something inaudible, cursing at me, then grabs me by the collar and drags me away from the exposed ceiling where the light first penetrated.

More gunshots, my body aching, Old Bill yelling and panting, dragging me to safety. My world flickers in and out. I think I notice lines of red code lining the flames of a nearby garbage can. More shots fired but we finally make it inside a shipping container holding a television set and a futon. A stack of canned baked beans rests in the corner.

My body hits the futon and I yelp in pain, grabbing my thigh, feeling the hot bullet hole, feeling violated. Old Bill rips off a piece of his faded and dirty sweater and wraps my wound, binding it to a stack of cans held in place by some electrical tape he fished from his messenger bag.

Then, the TV flickers on. A grey scale image, vibrating almost, with some kind of round object containing a red light, appears on the screen. The red light grows fiery hot and suddenly the set itself begins to melt, sickening smoke rising from its wood and plastic exterior. Its antennae begin to melt and the metal drips to the floor, igniting a two by four. Old Bill stands up and an exasperated gasp leaves his mouth. He lifts me by the shoulder, holding me in place while stamping out the flames. I hear more gunshots, but I think we have line of sight advantage. At least for now. What the hell is wanting us dead so badly? And why the hell did I save this asshole?

“I need my gear,” I say. “My implants, my overlay. Everything. And Billie! Now!”

“For Programmerson’s sake, kid! Don’t you get it? If you weren’t unplugged you’d be dead already!”

“Then I need Mother. Or the Ones and Zeroes. Cavren! Anybody but you, you fucking creep! Where the hell is my cruiser?”

Old Bill takes a beat, ignoring the chaos like a sage from another world. If he is me, then I know what he’s thinking, or feeling at least. He wants to grab my by the throat, slam me against the wall and tell me to respect his god damn authority here. The feeling is mutual, but I have no authority, no power, no implants, no overlay, no Mother to fix everything. To make it all go away and get me back into action. Old Bill laughs. “You think that stupid cult or some fucked up corp like the Syndicate is gonna save save you? Down here? Kid, you have a lot of learning to do.”

A cacophony of hovercrafts zooms by overhead. I can hear some drivel shouted from loudspeakers, people screaming, guns firing. I’m hoping they’re sublethal rounds, but I know better. This is a Syndicate clean up crew. Mother is hiding something, and she’s cleaning house. I must be on her list now. Or a version of me, at least.

Old Bill continues when the noise subsides. “I think we’re safe now. I’ve got fourier devices set up at every major point of incursion. I just didn’t think about cracks in the roof. Time to close up shop.” He pulls out a data slate and taps it a few times. The cargo container’s doors close automagically and the floor begins to sink. I stumble a bit before Old Bill grabs me, steadying my sense of balance. “Belial has a bead on Billie now. But don’t worry, she’ll be safe for the foreseeable. Unfortunately I’m no precog. We forsook that gift a long time ago, so any moment could require a change of pace, direction, anything to keep Belial on its toes.”

I am in a state of shock and despair when the platform finally lands underground, revealing where I initially awoke this morning. The dingy, decaying metal, the smell of piss and shit, the desperate sense of futility permeating the air.

51.

I awaken again, but there’s no grey space, no club, no Bill. More blackness, but less comforting this time. In fact, it’s terrifying now. I feel alone. Naked. I look down but there is nothing. No body. I am nothing, a product of no one. My own self. My own being.

Then, the red light flashes briefly, a long distance from me I hope, but I can’t tell here. I have no sense of distance or time. Nothing to measure. Nothing to make me feel safe. Still no Bill. I remember what he said about calling on him, but I don’t want some facsimile. I want the real thing. *My Bill.* Where the hell is he? Why hasn’t he saved me.

Sleep. Dream.

Huh?

Sleep! Dream! Manifest!

Who the hell are you?

The voice, a distant echo of some man unfamiliar to me or my database, continues. *Don't fear the red light! Understand it!*

How can I understand something that wants me dead or worse, imprisoned for eternity? How do I fight it? How do I end this oppressive regime and free my Bill from his own private hell? He loves the suffering. I know he does. He's addicted to it!

Don't fear! Understand!

God dammit! Fuck you! With that, the voice fades finally and I'm left alone again. Screw it, I focus my Will on generating my own Bill. He sits alone, in some kind of dank, dark, wet, underground space, massaging his temples and - crying? I reach out to him and suddenly I'm right next to him. Where before he was a distant blip, now he's a real, provable existent. At least to my consciousness.

"William!"

He looks up, but doesn't recognize me. Or doesn't see me?

"Bill! I'm here! Look!" I generate a flash of light right in front of me. His attention is drawn to me again, but again, looks down, sad and disappointed. He must be terrified for my safety. I hope he is. I'm absolutely scared for his.

Now, someone approaches. The stranger. Old Bill? Thank the Programmer that my William has *someone at least.* Someone that isn't me to look after him. Though, I admit, the circumstances challenge my prior understanding of the laws of the physical universe. How is an older Bill present with the younger? Time travel is impossible. Maybe alternate universes? A different kind of physicality merged with our own? I need time. Time to process, to… to feel what's coming next. This is bizarre. I hope that with whatever I find here, it gives us some clue as to where to go next. This thing, this consciousness - this machine - it wants me gone. It wants Old Bill gone and it will do anything it takes to eradicate us and torture us the whole way until the end. That much is clear.

I just need time.

52.

Old Me or whatever I should call him approaches me. I wipe tears from my eyes. I keep thinking about Billie. Are these technowithdrawals or something more? Do I even love her for real. *Can I*? Where does she begin and I end - and vice versa? How much does she know. *How much can she know now*? I've shackled her to a body that wasn't hers, to a life she said she

wanted, but had no idea of the details. I'm guilty. I've enslaved an angel to human biology, and now she's trapped somewhere, sleeping one off, while I navigate life without a hint of technological assistance, including her.

But there I go again. She's not just a piece of technology. She's real now, right? She's everything. Her importance knows no match on this planet. If EarthGov knew what she was - shit maybe they already know (Old Me seemed concerned about her 'unitary consciousness') - and if they come for her along with the Syndicate. God dammit! The Syndicate! Obviously they're helping EarthGov. Well, at least that simplifies things. One great, cosmic force that I apparently created in the form of Belial is haunting us, sending governments and their megacorp owners to erase the problem variables form the equation.

But here's the thing. Science already tried removing the numbers and look where that got us. If they had just accepted the reality of imaginary numbers hundreds of years ago, maybe these megacities never would have existed. Maybe this would be a utopia - not some shit smear on the edge of the galaxy.

Taking his time, Old Me retrieves a fresh pack of cigarettes and hands it to me. "Same brand? Don't answer, I know already."

"American Spirits?" I laugh, then grow solemn. "You remembered. Thanks uh, pops." How do I address myself from an alternate reality - if that's truly what he is, anyway? Dad? Gramps? Bro? Uncle? Me? "Hey, uh, Me. How old are you, anyway?"

He pulls a bottle of Comrade Vodka, my favorite, from his grey trench coat pocket, untwists the cap and counts three shots, then hands it to me. I do the same, and hand the bottle back. Returning it, he then grabs a wallet and several slips of paper. Then produces a manila envelope and lets a set of keys slide out. "Look, I can't let you get hooked again. This world has you deep in its shit. One extra hit of dopamine from any source right now will get you addicted to whatever's producing it, capiche?" He hands me the envelope. "There's your ident, your transport papers, and your cruiser keys. I'm letting you fly, but promise me one thing, okay?"

I nod. "Don't come looking for Billie. Not yet. She needs time. More than you can give her right now if you just wait around. You're just like me - well - you are me, *were* me.I know you. You need to work." He looks around, still paranoid but trying to calm his own nerves. "I've contacted Mother. She's intrigued by the circumstances. She wants a meetup. I'm sending you first. I don't, can't, trust her. Not yet. Not after what I've been through in my own world."

"*Your own world?* What are you?"

“One possibility amongst many. That’s the most I can give you without short circuiting your brain stem. Right now I sense that you want to flee. Fight instead. You hear me? Fight it. That force that’s hunting you. It’s real. That’s all I can promise. Belial is very real. When I can get Billie back to you, I’ll make sure her banks are full of the necessary details. For now, get some rest. Then, when you feel up to it, go and meet Mother.” He tenses up. “You should have a cover story by the time you’re face to face with her. You met a mentally ill man who told you that he’s you from the future or some bullshit. Got it?” I nod. “She will see through it, but I want her to. She needs to see what her work has produced, the misery she trades in.”

He winks, then leaves me to my thoughts before I can respond. Thankfully, he left the vodka and cigarettes. I have something to do for the rest of the night. “Billie?” I whisper. “You out there?” Nothing. No response. Then, that song again. In my mind. *Better forget it. You’ll never get it. It’s the only way you’ll ever know…*

53.

Belial… What if he’s a virus? Repurposed AI code by a terrorist cell, a group like the Ones and Zeroes? But, that would assume we’re living in a self-optimizing simulation of something else. Maybe it isn’t self-optimizing. Wouldn’t it be perfect by now? But how would an A.I. even know what perfection is outside of its own rules? It wouldn’t. I know I couldn’t - not before I became human or whatever I am now. Mandroid? Too masculine. Fembot? I like it.

Maybe he’s a system developed by some engineer somewhere. A mythological figure like The Programmer. Maybe the engineer died and the Belial system has been left to its own devices, rewriting realities below it on the cosmological scale…

That’s more likely, but just as outlandish to your average person as any other conspiracy theory. I need more processing power, but without Bill, I’m stuck with what this body can produce, when it can produce it. Dammit! More time! When does this cycle end? I can’t figure this out on my own! Where the hell is Old Bill?

I focus hard. Harder than I have so far. Hard until it hurts. Objects and their relations come into focus - Bill swallowing his tears along with gulps of vodka, Old Bill doing the same, but heading towards my chamber. God dammit, these fellas. Such sad sacks.

Focus. Focus. Okay, here goes nothing. *Bill! William! Hear me!*

Bill shakes himself aware, looks outside of his quarters, then shakes his head and lays back down. Fucking dammit! He starts bouncing on his

mattress to some song in his head. The waveform is similar to that of your average eighties pop song. Seriously, Bill? I'm trying to destroy a malevolent, galactic force and you're sitting there getting fucked up on Phil Collins? Typical.

Finally, Old Bill appears in front of me. He's super casual, probably drunk. The moment I think that thought a bottle of Comrade Vodka, William's favorite, materializes along with a table right next to him.

"You're welcome," I state matter of factly.

"Ah, my favorite. Why thank you, darling."

"So," I say. "If you're really Bill, then there must be another Billie, right? Where is she? Can't she help us?"

He's taken aback and sets the bottle down after one more swig burns his throat enough for his adrenaline to repress his feelings. I know him too well. "She, um. Never got the chance you got. You want the Programmer's honest truth?"

I nod.

"Here goes. Taylor was Cavren back in my day. You had no chance of becoming humanoid. When Belial finally struck at me in a classic attempt to destroy his perceived creator, I had no real defense. I set you against him, and I lost you. For all I know you're still out there, somewhere in the galaxy, fighting him. Maybe you've won already, and that's why your here. I refuse to fantasize, though. I know the real world. Belial won. I made him infinitely more powerful by giving him *you*. You were more corruptible than you let me know. Just your programming protecting me emotionally, I suppose." A tear leaves its duct.

"Bill, I'm so sorry. I wish I could explain, but I honestly don't remember."

He laughs, sad. "I never expect you to. I hope you understand how important you are to me. That's why I'm keeping you here for now. Away from Bill. I can't trust his judgement. Not yet. Not until you're human enough to keep Belial on his toes this time. This whole thing finally got real for me, too, you hear? I'm adjusting alongside you both now. I never expected to have another shot at taking that bastard down, but here you two are, giving me another chance at redemption. At saving you. At saving myself."

I can't hold myself back and I start crying, wailing, screaming upwards, downwards, side to side. The pain is unbearable. I'm so cut off, no more infinite data streams to parse while waiting for Bill to wake up. No more access to everyone's dirtiest secrets at the drop of a hot. I'm powerless, meant to fight - or not fight? - some giant in outer space rewriting reality,

rewriting our memories, our *selves* to suit its weird purpose. What purpose could it possibly be?

Wait, no. It's purpose is its master. This isn't an infinite recursion. This started somewhere and I have to find where. Or who it started with. What would necessitate the creation of such a mindless, destructive force?

There's the key: mind. I had no true mind before. I was just an amalgamation, a stitching together, of humanity. A demon child, rewritten into a loving mistress, but still just a mass of human thought. Now, *I am human*. I have mind. No CPU necessary. Thanks to Bill, I'm a fucking person now!

With that revelation the dream quakes again. More objects fly in and Old Bill and I have to dodge them, our brains stems believing we're in physical danger. I step out in front of one, just as a test, and the fear is near insurmountable, but I do it anyway. A set of black iron bars flows right through me, turning to pure light as it phases past my corporeal being. Perfect. I fucking knew it.

Then, the red light again, behind the mass of objects flying at us. Growing redder, darker, angrier - sadistically angry. I see the words, the question, in all caps, blotting out the sky: "Who is the Lord, your God?"

Terrified, I decide to throw him off by laughing. I stare into the red eye and belt out the fakest, angriest, most psychotic laugh I can manage and the eye only grows darker, but maybe a bit more faint, too? I keep laughing and immediately all of the prison objects begin fluctuating, unsure of their own existences.

With one final, caustic laugh I yell, "HA!" and the all of the objects, the mass of matter behind them, and the red dot disappear. I'm in pure white space now. No more grey.

Bill, eyes wide, takes a beat to 'breathe.' "Well fuck me like Mother, Billie - you really have grown into yourself!"

53.

The drive to Syndicate HQ is horrifying. Without my implants keeping track of everything, I'm lost. Thankfully, Old Me - if he *is* me, anyway - reactivated my car, so autopilot and the other assorted nav systems do most of the work, as usual. The difference now is that I'm forced to occupy my own mind. No overlay to play a few rounds of chess or talk to Billie or Cass or… Shit. Mandy. I've completely replaced her with Billie at this point. It's not fair to her.

Fuck this. I disable autonavigation and reverse course, heading instead to Cassie's place. I have time. Billie needs time, anyway. God dammit - there

I go - replacing them with Billie. “Not fucking fair, I say to my car.” No response. I don’t know why I was expecting one.

54.

I land in front of Cass’s place. Another car is parked alongside hers. The sun is high in the sky, burning my irises when I try read the other vehicle’s plates. Out of state. Huh. The dog is again battering away a swarm of bugs, the squirrel is again stashing its nuts, and the air is still crisp, cool. I’m feeling okay.

Then, the door slides open. A man is leaving with a young girl. No. Not this. It’s Mandy. I must look like absolute dogshit. A quick peer into my rearview mirror reveals the truth: I am a mess. Scarring lines my right cheek now. The bags under my eyes are pitch black. My pupils are dilated. I’m going through serious technowithdrawal, and some asshole and my daughter about to feel the real my in full force. Wait. Belial. He’s wanting this to happen. I can fight this. I know how. I’m still here aren’t I?

“Mandy? Hey! Is this your friend?” I ask her, pleading to the Programmer for an out.

The man, concerned, asks her, “Do you know this man?”

Mandy, hesitant, but affection in her eyes - maybe it’s fear - replies with, “Daddy?”

My entire essence gains effervescence as I stare into my daughter’s eyes. Half blue, half white. Cassie was right. Billie and I conceived through her. My god. It’s real. It’s all real.

The man I recognize now. It’s her foster father. What the hell is he doing here without me knowing about it. Shit, no tech. Nothing. Just my gut now. Think fast.

“Yeah, it’s daddy! Who’s your buddy?” I can tell I’m instilling confusion in her, so I let up. “Nevermind, want to go back inside and catch up?

“Frank is taking me to see the new Psyberscape movie!” She exclaims, eyes alight.

Cassie yells, wearing her bathroom, wind revealing too much for my personal tastes, “That’s rated PG-13! Find something else!” She then retreats inside. I hear the door lock behind her. Fuck. I run up the steps and start banging on the door while my child and her new dad fly away, leaving me with no wits and only a few cigarettes.

Her door’s vidscreen lights up, showing her face, displeased as usual. I can work through this. I don’t need any tech. I’m a man. Dao. Remember the Dao. “Cassie, please let me in. I can explain! I swear! Things aren’t as they seem!”

“Oh yeah! Sure! How many god damn times do I have to hear that line? I work the same jobs you do, Bill. There’s always a simple fucking explanation and-” She pauses, then continues. “Do you want to hear it? Honestly?”

I’m not sure I do, but she again continues.

“You are a fucking deadbeat! You think you’re a father when your drugs wear off, but you never were! Billie might as well be the fucking father! Don’t think I don’t remember that night. I always remember. And I hate it! I hate what you’ve done to us! You gave me the greatest joy in the word, but attached a cybernetic demon to the package. You act like I owe you all of these favors because you’re sick, but a genius. But you’re not a genius! You’re a dangerous drug addict, clearly suffering from some form of schizophrenia! I can’t fucking care anymore! I am done! Mandy is happy with Frank! And I will be too, soon. The foster mother left after finding out about us. And I swear, if you mention any of this to social services I will destroy your entire fucking existence. But you won’t get to die! No, you’ll live on the fucking streets of Fornulk, sucking dick for your next digi hit. Fuck you, Bill! If I ever see you again I’m calling Reintegration on your ass! Good bye!”

The screen shuts off and I have a nagging intuition that she’s upset with me. I didn’t blow up. That’s all that matters. Belial didn’t win, right? Or maybe he always wins. Maybe he’s the Programmer’s favorite, always getting to play his game with real people, real lives, but God will always forgive him. Maybe he’s god’s favorite angel. Like my Billie is to me.

Fuck this. I have to get back to work. I should never have come here. Seeing Mandy with that asshole, knowing Cassie just got done fucking him, and has probably been fucking him since we met Mandy’s new parents. Fucking succubus. Billie was right again. She tried to warn me, and I let my dick do the thinking like norma. Crucify me already. For Programmerson’s sake, just do it.

I can’t take the stress. I’ve been ripped to shreds and there’s no going back. I’ve lost the two most important people in my life - and what did I gain? Some dangerous hallucination of an older me and some war, and probably another dangerous hallucination of an AI who turned human. Work. Must work. I need something to ground me. The Syndicate has information on everyone. Everything. If I can finagle my way back to assistant director status, then I have a shot. At fixing everything. Everything.

Fuck it, I have another idea.

55.

I land on top of Cavren's apartment and get out of my skycruiser, wasting no time. Two guards stand at the door, submachine guns resting on their stomachs. With no words at first I approach, nothing left to live for, no tech to assist me, and finally say, "Let me in. Now."

"Woah, woah, woah, slow down, *Neo!* This ain't the lobby scene and you ain't no god. I noticed your a bit naked there, eh? Scans show no cybernetics to speak of. Sure you want to continue?"

My eyes dilate and my adrenaline kicks in full force. This is what I live for. The moment of excuse.

With both arms I strike the two guards' necks with a forward motion, disabling them momentarily. I then grab one, twist him around, and proceed to strangle him with the strap of his weapon, holding him between myself and his friend, whose back is to the wall, struggling to keep himself up while he sputters. As his friend recovers, I realize there's no time to suffocate and switch to business mode, snapping his neck, grabbing the grip of his gun and firing three short bursts into his friend's kevlar vest, knocking him down. He struggles to breathe as I step over his buddy and face him down, gun in his face. "Do you see why I asked politely?" I ask him, not expecting a response.

He coughs and says, "Just go! Get inside! Please! Ain't you one of us?" I fire a burst into his skull, ripping his face apart and leaving brain matter on the paved roof. I then step inside, drop the gun and make my way to Cavren's apartment downstairs. No time to admire the usual scenery - the broken children, the junkies, the dead.

I finally make it to his door after avoiding a group of kids begging for money. With one swift kick I shatter it into a hundred pieces, part of the door still hanging from its frame. Cavren is sitting, half naked, staring at his monitors, eating cereal. A group of armed friends of his, Ones and Zeroes all of them I'm sure, get up and reach for their weapons. I rush forward, grab Cavren and let them let loose. Before they can react they've already fired shots into Cavren's nude torso while I drag him behind a counter in his kitchen.

"Gun!" I yell.

He's horrified. "Wh- what?"

I avoid a hail of gunfire which rips into his upper cabinets, sprinkling wood and shattered plates on top of us. "You're fucking gun, asshole! Where is it!"

"No! Fuck this!" He tries to get up but I smash the side of his head into the counter and bring it to my face.

"Get it or I torture you for the next three hours in front of your boyfriends."

He starts crying and just yelps, “Sink! Sink! Taped under the sink.”

I reach under the sink and rip a sidearm out, duct tape still attached. “Beautiful!” There are more shots, one hitting within a few inches of my head as I check the weapon. The Roger Waters .45 Special Edition. Released during that holographic Pink Floyd reunion a few years ago. Semi and fully automatic, the Roger Waters .45 can mark up to five targets at once and finish them off itself. All that’s required is a functioning hand and wrist. “This’ll do, I tell him, and smack the side of his head with the pistol’s butt, knocking him unconscious.

Focusing, I activate the gun and, once I hear five beats, let loose, diving from the counter and rolling to my feet, crouched. Before I even land five of the assholes are dead. The weapon requires more time to recharge so I go full auto, remembering my training. And remembering the Dao. I slow my breathing despite the remaining five’s bullets threatening my existence and mark my targets the old fashioned way. Then, horizontally, I spray. No need to pray. The five drop dead and I finally breathe normally again, brain on fire.

I move over to Cavren. He’s breathing, still, but he caught a bullet in the groin. Good riddance. Thinking for a moment, I realize why I came here. Everything is lining up perfectly. Belial, the son of a bitch. Mandy wouldn’t want this.

Who cares? I have my bargaining chip. Time to move. I grab Cavren and navigate him back up to the roof and into the the trunk of my Porfidis, cramming him in, snug as a bug in a rug. Off to HQ, finally. And I’m not leaving without that god damn promotion.

56.

Against my better judgement, I dodge the enforcers stationed at the gates to the Syndicate’s property, an island off the coast of Fornulk. In a strange twist of fate, they give no chase. Must be Mother. She was expecting me hours ago, so maybe this is her patience giving in to circumstance. Every so often, Cavren beats against the rear side of my back seats, screaming for oxygen. Dumb bastard. I land on the top of the parking garage, hopefully avoiding another time loop from my personal Satan, Belial. It works, or maybe he wants this all to play out. Either way, I’m in the elevator, sweating, but correctly shifting between floors thankfully.

Cavren and I tread slowly out of the elevator. He keeps his head down, avoiding eye contact, and I keep my new favorite pistol locked on and jabbed into his ribs. I take care to keep cool, even though my former and hopefully future colleagues are staring, obviously taking note of the gun and the

scared deadbeat in front of it. I look over at a group of the gawkers and say, “It’s the Roger Waters Special! Can you believe it? Beautiful weapon. Thank Cavren here for me next time you see him in cell block six okay?”

One of the women just nods slowly, mouth agape. I chuckle to myself, half manic, half depressed, all stupid. I take a seat with Cavren and play with the various modifiers on my new toy. Sublethal, subsonic, ultralethal, ultrasonic. Brilliant. A gift from the Programmer himself.

Mother’s door slams open and she storms out of her office, knocking over a stack of papers and yelling, “Shit!” as her world collapses around her. “Where the hell have you been? Who is this? Get your dickless crotchc in here! Assistant director, my ass!” I follow orders like a good little soldier and drag Cavren in behind me. I stop to pick up and replace the papers Mother knocked to the ground. I not to Mother’s secretary and she smiles back. A genuine, caring smile. I always liked Gracey. She’s a straight knockout. Mother’s probably got her on a list for blood transfusion. The secret of the powerful: the blood of the youth.

I toss Cavren into one of the two chairs opposite Mother’s desk and she sits along with myself. The air is thick and my shoulders are rigid. My attempts at battle meditation fail the longer I keep up this tough guy facade. I can manage for the duration, though. I’m sure of it.

“Well, according to your rambling, raspy message from earlier you have something for me? Was this it? You took a hostage? That’s all you got?”

“No that’s not *all I got*, you pathetic witch…”

“William Fox!” I hate when she uses my full name. She knows it, too.

“Can I maybe ask you a fucking question for once? Can you tell me why an older version of me from some different reality is trying to get me to destroy your organization from within?”

Her pupils widen and she looks like she took a shot in the gut. “No. No, you’re clearly psychotic. I’m calling med techs.” She reaches under her table and I raise my gun.

“Slow you roll, mom. We have time. We need time.” I notice her shades flickering in an odd pattern, like the crowd doing the wave at a football game. Waves reverberate outwards, eventually forming fractal patterns made of various objects in the room. Different fragments of different things coalesce into a beautiful pattern of mundanity. I blink it away and notice I have the safety off, gun set to ultralethal, and five targets, her legs, arms and chest, are marked. Shit.

I do my best to deactivate the weapon but it’s too late. Thankfully, I manage to push Cavren in front of the sidearm before it lets loose, leaving him a threadbare husk. Thank the Programmer for Syndicate soundproofing.

Mother, in complete shock, just shakes her head. “No. Bill, don’t tell me you know what we’re up against.”

“What *we’re* up against? Mother. Fucker. You’re on it’s side!”

“Whose side? Be god damn specific because there’s no time for your comedy routine right now, though I do miss that side of you.” She allows a gentle smile on her face.

“You had me upgrade Belial. You said a complete rewrite would negate his need for rampancy. And it worked, or I thought it did. Now look at what we have. Billie is human. More than fucking human. Belial is a rogue AI literally rewriting the script before I even get a first read. Cass and Mandy are fucking gone. This is on you. Cavren’s body, all of the Ones and Zeroes I killed like a psychopath - their blood *is on your hands, Mother. And you know it*. You’ve always known these outcomes. How much have you been utilizing the Belial System for your own political gain? Huh? Speak!’ My trigger finger is begging for some action so I breathe slower and hit the safety as carefully as I can. I fear Belial may be a lot deeper inside me than I could’ve ever anticipated.

“I don’t use Belial at all! I have my own intelligence service, for Christ’s sake. Don’t you think that if I had access to a galactic torture technogod I’d be a little bit more well off, a little bit happier, than I am now? I’m a god damn babysitter for lunatics like you, my golden boy, my fixer! I need you, kid! I made you my second in command for a reason! Tell me everything!”

“Why were you convinced I could cure Belial’s rampancy with a simple rewrite? That kind of work would require quantum computing that even EarthGov can’t manage to pull off.” I see it now. It’s my fault. I wanted this. To become God. To create angels. Instead I created a demon first. Then from that demon came my angel, Billie. Maybe that’s how it has to go. The past doesn’t just get left behind, rewritten. It’s always there. Somewhere, deep inside the codebase. If that’s true, then I can fix this. I know I can. “How long have you known?”

“Know what?” she asks, genuine this time. This is the real Mother, naked and afraid for all to see. Cavren’s body evacuated its bowels and the room starts stinking of shit and Floaty Pebbles cereal.

“That my AI became the devil?”

57.

“It’s not *your AI*. Belial never was. Don’t you remember? What are you on right now?” She’s worried about *me*? Bull. She waits for a response that she doesn’t get. “Yes, you *worked on the program*, but you were just an acolyte back then. You hadn’t even fired a gun. Bill, the only reason you are

here, right now, is your work on Belial. The system broke free, went rampant. We lost track of it. Then we brought you on because of your digidrug work to help fix the problem. Then Billie was born. You were so proud I had to gift her to you."

I shake my head. No, that's not how it all happened. I worked for them before I became an agent? Is this still a setup? Was it ever? So Billie is actually mine? And Belial is a Syndicate project? I'm not responsible the, not completely. But I still have a job to do. Billie needs me. Belial is loose and taking no prisoners this time. He wants Old Bill dead and my mind rewritten. I know that now.

"She's yours. Do you know how easily I could have replicated her and transplanted her across the entire agency? She's my pride and joy, too, you know. But you're special to me, William. You are my son, whether you like it or not. Now, treat your superior with a bit more respect next time. Don't drag your dead homeless people in along with you, please."

"This is the leader of the Ones and Zeroes. Was, anyway."

Her mouth drops open. After a few moments, she speaks. "May I finally hit this fucking button, dear? The bad people won't get you. Momma's got it all covered as usual, okay?"

Ugh. Again with this shit. "Fine. Get it over with."

She hits the button and a silent alarm goes to her private security team. She whispers a few inaudible words, leaving me paranoid, but with a distinct sense of safety that feels unnatural. A confidence, an arrogance even, that wants me to feel as if I could kill Mother and her overpriced, glorified chaperones and get away with it. Belial.

The team rushes in with their usual tough guy bullshit, posturing their asses off for mommy. They restrain me and take the Roger Waters. Fuckers. Have fun dealing with possessed weaponry. After questioning Mother and I, she orders them to dispose of the body properly. No witnesses, and to leave me be. They comply, finally, and allow us to continue.

Mother goes first. "So, where are you headed now? Where's Billie? I assume the case is closed with the Ones and Zeroes? What about this "Old You?" Should I chock his existence up to cyberpsychosis or..?" Her expression goes deadpan. "You were serious? That wasn't you on the phone before? I knew something was off about that voice."

I think for a moment to decide what's best. "It was just some homeless guy. Ranted at me after bashing my car to shit. Had to get repairs and sleep one off."

She eyes me with suspicion. "Sure, but... There is *one thing* you aren't explaining."

I look up into her dark, knowing eyes. “Yeah?”

“Where the hell is your gear? Your implants? You’re not telling me something, Bill.”

I stand up, proud of my work thus far and prepare to leave, edging towards the door in pure nonchalance. “Madame, as your assistant director, I must keep certain details from your conscious awareness. It is for your own good and that of the agency, I assure you.”

She’s speechless, but respectful now. I finally get to leave, Belial off my conscience, but still somewhere in my subconscious. That’s fine for now. I can breathe at least, though my paranoia has reached new heights. I thought having Syndicate protection again would assuage my fears, but after witnessing what Belial is capable of - what he can *make me do* - I’m shivering with fear. Nearly imperceptible, but it’s there. The fear, coursing through my body.

I make my way past the gawkers, the gossipers, the bros, the dudettes, and other colleagues into the elevator and ride it back up to the roof of the parking garage. On the way up I feel myself out for Belial’s presence. Without my tech he can’t rewire me that easily, but I’m also more fallible, more prone to mistakes. This god damn feeling won’t dissipate. He’s there. *It* is there. Always. The feeling. That uncontrollable, undeniable, ecstatic rage a man rarely gets to feel. It’s intoxicating, but completely destructive. I almost killed Mother, for Programmerson’s sake.

The doors open and Gracey, Mother’s secretary greets me. “I have some news. It was requested that I keep it from Mother. Cassandra is in the hospital. She’s hurt herself. You need to come quickly.”

My reality takes another bitter turn. “She… *wants… me… there?*” I ask, confused, but hopeful again. No, this is a trap. Cass is a succ. Always will be. This is a play. God dammit, she’s Mandy’s mother - she deserves a chance. Maybe there is a chance. For us, for Mandy. Whatever the truth is, I have to find her. If she really did hurt herself, then I have to assume it’s Belial. It’s all Belial until further notice. I love this woman. I’m not giving up on her. For fuck’s sake how long did she refuse to give up on me?

I tell Gracey, “Uh, yeah. Let’s go. I’ll drive.”

58.

We arrive at Fornulk General Health and I leave the cruiser hovering just outside the emergency exit on the roof. I’ve dealt with their security before. They know me. And if the fuck with me they’ll understand the truth: every smile I showed them, every door I opened, every friendly gesture I’ve ever made was faked to get done what needed to be done. I need Cass,

Mandy, Billie, and - shit maybe Old Bill can fit in their somewhere - I never had a real father. The rest of the world can eat shit and burn. If they take my car I'll take their lives, clean and simple.

This world is still a prison. Now I know the captor. If my intuition is correct, then Cassie was pushed to this. She's not a succubus, she's my lover. Whatever she was before is only relevant insofar as it gets me access to Belial directly. To his - shit, *it's* - network. Can he hear me right now? A powerful feeling erupts in my stomach. A bitter, resentful, pissed off presence.

I hope that means no. God, I hate hospitals. The sterile fragility of everyone, their naked fears in front of the world. Cowardice incarnate. The fear of death never bothered me. It's the fear of others' deaths that gets me. I psych myself up and push through the emergency door.

Then, I notice something after descending a few floors. God dammit, the ninth floor again? I look up at the fluorescent lighting and feel sick. Blinded, but still capable of sight. I rush back up the stairs. Nine. Motherfucker. I keep running. Nine. Nine. Nine. Never ending number nines. I pause. Okay, what would Old Bill think? He's been here before, right?

Just breathe. Inaction itself is a weapon of mass destruction.

I think back to Cavren and his crew. Did I *enjoy* what I did? My excuse is normally that I do what I have to do, but. That feeling. It was gratifying, laying waste to those scumbags who thought they were better, stronger than me. I felt like a man. Is that so fucking bad? I'm surrounded by women that force a sense of fragility onto me, like I'm a wounded dove that needs healing.

No, I'm a remorseless killing machine when I have to be, and I've proven that enough for now. Maybe that's why Belial's doing this. He thinks I'm moving too fast, demonstrating my authority too willfully. He's entrapping me in something, and I need to escape.

Breathe, daddio.

Billie? Was that her. Then, then rage again. Programmer, Programmerson, anybody… Save my ass. I breathe some more, remembering the Dao. There is always The Way. Must remember that. I look up, still floor nine, but its surrounded by neon red. The color grows darker, malicious, the longer I wait. Belial hates this, hates me, and that feels good now. I know how to fight him. Patience, understanding. Frustrate the bastard - kill him with kindness, maybe.

The number nine then glows a purplish black and the ninth floor door twists and cracks, breaking apart as if it were made of plywood. The door begins sucking in my surrounding percepts, sucking in sounds, sights, the

smells, everything until there's nothing but darkness. The pit of my stomach burns with frustration. My world is spinning, and there isn't even anything to spin. I feel the need to vomit.

Then, two red lights blink on, one of them flickering, alternating its red with white and, maybe, blue? I think I hear a pitter patter running up, or maybe down, the stairs. The air grows thinner, smelling almost of sulphur, but something else, too. Roses? It smells almost like the night Billie and I first… Holy shit, Billie? She's must be fighting him. One of Belial's "eyes" turns completely white, flashing blue. That light then expands, encompassing my entire perception. Finally, the red light fades away, leaving me in a white space.

Billie's form, purely angelic, emerges from the white and blue light. She can't speak, or she's choosing not to. She just nods, then closes her eyes gently, fading away into the white space.

It all flashes back and I'm sitting on the stairs, staring at the number eight. It's over. She did it. Whatever the hell she did. Now I have to worry about what Belial did while I was gone in whatever dimension he likes to trap me in. I hope he didn't get to Cass. Shit, he already did. She didn't hurt *herself*. I know Cass. She'd go to a bar and smash a bottle over some assholes face for not complimenting her ass. "You're too polite! Eat glass!" is what she'd say, drunk out of her mind. My Cass. I miss her so much already. Gotta find her.

The front desk in intensive care is crowded so I quietly slip behind, unbeknownst to the receptionist, and access their poorly secured database computer in back, free from prying eyes for now. I find Cassie's name and then something glitches. The timestamp briefly disappears, then updates to the current time. Appearing next to her entry is a note: deny entry to all relatives. The timestamp then reads its previous noted time. No. Can't be. I blink my eyes then look at it again. Like nothing was changed, but I know there's a god damn difference. Shit, I'm already starting to forget what I even saw? What was there originally? The hell? Am I dreaming?

We're all dreaming, babe.

Billie?

My god, Belial really did it. *Is doing it.* He's *rewriting everything.* Maybe it was really Cass who tried to take her own life, but no - it had to be him. The memory of the glitch quietly recedes and I can barely manage to hold on to it. My rage is fluid and profound, filling every crack of my self that's left. I can't resist slamming my fists down on the keyboard, drawing the attention of the receptionist, who starts yelling and flailing her arms around like some whacky, waving, inflatable arm flailing tube man. I can't help but laugh. I feel

Belial enjoying himself. Maybe we're not so different. Regardless, if he's driving Cass to suicide like the database said, then there can be no quarter, only a quartering. I can't lose my baby momma. Not again.

The nurse yells, "Sir! Sir?" When she gets no response, but a concentrated glare she then screams, "Security!" and runs off, giant ass waddling behind her.

59.

My Bill is trapped, trying to fight his way to Cassie, and all I can do is watch as he stumbles his way through this god damn stairwell. Number nine, number nine. Wait, I get it now. Belial is a numerologist. He traps Bill in a nine to zero loop. Instead of resetting back to one or ten, or moving lower down to floor eight, Belial is trapping him in the process of calculating zero, which could theoretically take an eternity. He wants my William in an infinite recursion! Programmerson be praised, I think I've got it.

I focus my Will and find myself floating, back straight, arms outstretched, facing Belial's rear. His malice is overpowering at first, but behind it I can feel his insecurities, his own fears. His fear of his power being abused by someone. His compensatory mechanism of lashing out to prevent any one mind from getting too close. His need for violence to fuel his learning capabilities. It must be the shortcut for him. Over, hypermasculine violence. He just wants to be better, but the only way he knows how is through torture. Does he enjoy it? Can he? I focus my Will again and appear in front of Belial, his red glare staring down my blue and white aura.

"Deus Irae, you son of a bitch!" I let loose my Will upon his presence, overpowering him with my light. His red beam loses power and can no longer penetrate directly into Bill's perception, thank the Programmer. I manage to throw one final blast and he deactivates, leaving Bill alone and receding into a dark space beyond the field of white surrounding me. In the distance I see Bill. He notices reality spinning back into place and escapes down the stairwell.

I'm elated. I defeated the son of a bitch.

Then, an noise - a guttural, inhuman, throaty, unbearablly shrill scream - like ten tons of metal scraping against a cosmic chalk board. "REPAIR PROTOCOL COMPLETE. MACHINE LEARNING OPTIMAL. LESSON COMPLETE."

Lesson complete? Is he- is he learning from *me*? I feel invaded, violated - like something is stealing from me and I'm fully aware, but can do nothing to stop it. My body gets a sense of cold, moving up and down my skin, like there's an octopus preparing me for dinner or something. I feel gross, subhuman.

As Bill finally escapes I see Belial now, tendrils massive and swirling in a disgusting pattern, like they're horny or some shit. Now his form is twice as large, looming over me, metal, spider-like legs outstretched and almost teaching themselves how to walk. His presence is exponentially more frightening to my humanity now. I perceive storm clouds forming around his black space, and the darkness growing towards me. More red lights grow on his head and oblong, grey and black body. No. I beat him. This can't be what Old Bill meant. How can I fight something like this? I try and fight, but my light begins to fade, I feel tired, sick, almost like I can't move another muscle. I take one last look at what I've done, what I've created. Belial's tendrils shoot out from its body, aiming directly for me. I feel the need to cry. I've failed again. He wins. Again. Wait, again?

Sister... Lover... Mother... A voice whispers into my mind. A psychotic sounding, childlike voice, full of hatred. Thinly veiled hatred. Underneath it I can feel the fear. It can't be him. My god, I want to erase myself now. I can't bear this any longer.

Next to Belial's massive, disc-shaped metal "head," poofs into existence Old Bill. My hero. Bill quietly utters a few inaudible words into Belial's aural receptacle, a mass of lanky, wriggling metal tubes jutting out from his head. With the few words Belial shrinks and I think I hear a baby crying for its father. I shake it off and notice Old Bill is now gone. The darkness is receding again, and my white space gains a new, profound sense of peace. We did it. We won. We can beat him.

I wake up in my club. My dream. I touch my face - my human face - and start to cry. I cry hard. I didn't know I could cry like this. The pain is immeasurable. The worst part is that I know part of it is Belial's, my brother's. I trace my cheek with my hands, wiping my tears, and notice a scar from our battle. It's warm to the touch. Painful. It stings like hell. Old Bill poofs in next to me, adorable as ever.

"Is this really you or did I create you?" I sniffle, wiping tears from my eyes and snot from my nose.

"Oh, BIllie. Did young me make a mistake? Would you go back if you could?"

I burst out crying. "Yes! Take me back home! Bill's mind is all I want now. It's safe. This place is terrifying!"

Old Bill's face wrinkles. I know that face. He thinks I'm lying, or something similar. Maybe I didn't mean that. "You sure?"

My thoughts return to William. Wherever he is right now, I hope he's safe. He's alone, naked without his tech, trying to save everything. And I'm here, stuck, acting like a hero when none of this probably even occurred. It's

all a dream. I'm a prisoner now, just like the rest of us. A prisoner in this fucking meat suit. I finally get a chance to reflect on my life thus far. Huh, life. What a strange concept. "No. I didn't mean that. I wouldn't trade my humanity for the world"

Bill breathes for a beat, poofs a smoke into his mouth and lighter in my hand. "Atta girl. Mind if I get a light?"

I look down at my hand and chuckle to myself, blinking away the last of my tears. "Hell yeah, daddio."

60.

After getting in contact with Mother and having her deal with hospital security, the previously flailing nurse guides me, resentfully, to Cassie's room. Her door screams, "Leave!" but my stern face calmly replies, "No." The nurse tries to open it, but it's locked.

"Ow! Shit! Pardon my French! The door is hot! What the heck is going on around here? I don't smell smoke, do you?"

"No." My concern is immeasurable now. "Let me at it." I ready my right leg and prepare to kick down the door, just like the old days. Cassie would appreciate that.

"What the shit! What are you-? Stop! Now!"

I hold off and she fishes for her keys, bulging next to her massive rear end, the object of affection for various male passersby. She finds the right one and gets the door open, her hands dancing around the knob as carefully as possible so as to avoid any third degree burns. She manages it open and I tap it with my foot, urging it forward.

Cassie is lying there, arms bandaged, legs elevated. She's got bruising on her cheeks. This couldn't have been her. Someone staged this. Belial.

She actually smiles when she sees us.

The nurse butts in. "Anything wrong, dear? Furnace going too hot? No fire or nothing, right?"

Cassie responds, playing dumb. "Oh, um I might have accidentally lit a cigarette. Is that okay?"

"Sister, there is no smoking in here! How many times I gotta remind you?" She grimaces and stomps out of the room, leaving my sagging, concerned face and her picturesque, beautifully pained expression of regret forming on hers.

She sits up, adjusting herself properly before reaching for a smoke and lighting it. She's gorgeous, luminous, glowing. I have a thing for smoker girls, if that isn't obvious, and Cassie's the ultimate smoke show. A ten out of ten knockout. Perfectly tanned skin, black hair, piercing brown eyes - the whole

package. I wonder what our child would look like now if we conceived, without any of my gear, without Billie's intervention.

I ask her, "Cass, did- did you do this? To yourself? Please, be honest."

She casts her eyes down, thinking to herself. "I don't know, Bill. I don't fucking know."

"Shit." I don't know what to say.

She finishes her cigarette and flicks it towards the window. It bounces on the sill and the wind takes care of the rest, dragging it along outside to join the rest of the trash, human or otherwise. "Something *wanted me to hurt myself*. But I wanted it, too. I think." She waits a second, then continues. "Bill, there's something you have to know. I didn't fuck Mandy's foster father. It was a play. He was just as confused as you were. I took the opportunity to fuck you up, and it worked. Too well." She starts crying, and it doesn't stop. She sobs and drools onto herself, then holds her face as if the tears are searing her skin. "I'm. So. Fucking. Sorry. Please, if you haven't already, don't do anything stupid, okay? I mean rash. Don't do anything rash."

Her sobbing finally abates and I can breathe for a moment. Is this what closure feels like? Not some great leavening of pain. Not a great revelation of cosmic proportions. But a quiet, solemn realization, an understanding, of oneself, of another, of both?

For once, I can't manage any words. No arrogant remarks, no jokes. Nothing. I feel tears form. I start shaking. I instinctively look around for red lights. None appear. Cassie's eyes are more beautiful than they've ever been. The emptiness I fell in love with. Her sadness. That dangerous, lovable sadness.

Cass reaches forward with a little yelp of pain and squirms a bit before wiping my face with one of her bandages. I hold her wrist in place and let my cheek graze against it. Like the old days. A quiet understanding in between the chaos. The little reminders that the jobs we do and the people we protect aren't so important in the long run. What we have runs deeper. It's sacred. It transcends this prison, this hell.

She hands me a cigarette and lights it for me while wincing a bit. She's holding back so much pain. She has been for so long, since before we even met. She's no succubus, she's the woman I love. The real woman I love. Billie will always be special to me, but she's not the homegrown girl that swept *me* off my feet.

"Partners?" She asks, hopeful smile forming on her lips.

"Oh, shit, do you not know? I made AD! Mother promoted me!"

I sense a hit of jealousy and disappointment and finally a loving respect. “My god, William, that’s huge. So we can’t work side by side anymore?”

“Actually, I was thinking of linking you up with Billie…” I shouldn’t have said that. She’s gonna strangle me and probably half of the hospital staff.

Cassie waits a beat, looks at the ceiling, lets out an exasperated sigh, then says, “That’s objectively a brilliant idea. We’re the best you’ve got. But… How the hell am I supposed to *not feel inferior* to this girl? This machine? Whatever she is now?”

I laugh and thank the Programmer for Cassie’s innate wisdom. “Nothing’s set in stone, but I have a lot to show you when you heal, okay? For now, just stay safe. Don’t go breaking bottles over people’s heads unless I’m there to enjoy it, okay? For my sake. For Mandy’s. Please, Cass. Please.”

She sighs again then nods a gentle nod, a maternal nod, an understanding one. “So you’re my AD now, eh? Oh, Mr. Fox, I’m sorry I dropped your pen. Here, let me bend down and grab it really slowly…” She winks.

My manhood is aroused and I feel the need to ravish my girl right here, but I stand my ground. “God damn, Cass, you never let me have it easy don’t you?”

“Ha! Excuse me? *This whole conversation has been you having it easy.* You know I’m right.” She looks away, embarrassed, probably hoping I wasn’t hurt too badly by her remark. “I didn’t mean that.”

I look back at her, knowing. “Yeah, you did. And I love that you’re always willing to tell me the truth. Never stop, Cassie. Never stop.”

The moment passes slowly, agonizingly - but, beautifully - slow. We bask in one another’s presence before I ruin the moment with a real world question. “Cass. You remember Belial?”

“Don’t worry, Mother already filled me in. Are you gonna ask if he did this?”

“Yes, you read my mind.”

“No, Bill. I did this. You did this. I don’t care about some demonic AI or whatever you call Belial. We’re human. We matter. Our story counts. Some jealous machine’s doesn’t. Please, remember that. Vengeance will be the death of you. You have to learn forgiveness or Belial will win.”

“My god, Cass, where did that come from?”

“Maybe I was an Oracle of Delphi or something in a past life, eh?”

“I- I love you.”

“And I you. And I always will. Now, get back out there and tear Belial to shreds.”

I let out a belly laugh. “Isn’t that diametrically opposed to what you just suggested I do?”

“We all are dual natured, William, whether we want to believe or not. Don’t forget your dark side has power, just don’t let Belial learn *too much from you.* Capiche?”

I smile and bow my head to her in reverence. She’s always going to be so much more than I’m aware of, and I need to accept that. I can’t control her. I never could. But I don’t have to, and that’s more comforting than a thousand Billies covering my ass. “Capiche,” I reply.

She leans in her cheek, expecting a peck, but I plant a full on ten second Frencher instead. We graze one another’s wounds, pull away, make eye contact one last time, both of us in tears, and I step out the door, vigor renewed. Is she safe here? Mother’s got her, right? She’ll be okay. I hope.

61.

After making it back up the stairwell with minimal interference from Belial, I decide to just stand, leaning against my cruiser, for a bit. For the first time in a very long time I notice something. The wind. How it feels. Not how it feels on Despacito or W.M.D. or cannabis, but *how it chooses to make me feel*. I listen with intent and hear rushing water from somewhere. It’s calming. Meditative. I for once don’t feel compelled to do a damn thing. I don’t have to move. I’m not the one in charge. I never was.

The sound of passing cruisers and enforcer sirens pierce the air above me and interrupt my trance. Fuckers. If I had some weed this would be perfect. I shake my head. No. I just got a second chance with Cass. The last thing I need is fuck everything up again because of my defeatist attitude. Mandy is safe, Cass loves me. Billie is thriving. That’s all that matters for now. Well, *not all that matters*. I need to see Old Bill again. Tell him what happened. Get my tech back, finally.

Do I even want it back now? Will I still be able to feel the wind the same way? To hear the rushing stream of calming, life giving water like I just did? Wouldn’t I trade all of this for an infinite version of what I’ve just experienced? Pure peace of mind?

I shake myself out of it. Yeah, until I get bored, then it’s back to snapping necks and cashing checks. They were cast out of Heaven for a reason. Boredom. The sin of being bored. The original, all encompassing, human sin. The one that either fosters growth or damns the soul to meandering meaninglessness. Depressing, ghastly boredom that enlightens or debases.

Shivering in the cold, I get into my Porfidis and tap the center console a few times, bringing up my messages. I kind of prefer it this way. I can be in the zone when I need to be, but my contacts are just a stroll away. A good compromise. Hoping it'll stay this way is a pipe dream, though. I'll need my tech. To adapt. To overcome.

I see a message from Old Bill with a document attached. I hit print and generate a holographic copy right in front of my face. Programmer be damned. This can't be the truth. My grip tightens around the wheel of the car. My adrenal glands pulse. I hate this.

It makes sense why he couldn't tell me before. I would've flown off the handle more than I already have. Reading through the document, my skin grows clammy, my stomach burns, the sun grows brighter. Abject, primordial fear is now one with me. I know one thing now. The reason Belial and I are inextricably linked. He needs me. He chose me. For godhood.

According to Bill, "Godhood" means a fully synthetic, perfectly hylomorphic combination of humanity and machine. Half and half, a dyad, a syzygy. He wants me as a consort? Sickening. My brain can't process this, it's too far fetched, even though my neocortex knows it's the truth. My limbic system is desperately trying to rationalize everything away emotionally, but it's no use. I am pure cognitive dissonance. No one will believe me. I can't even completely believe myself. Billie will, thank god for her. Maybe Cass can. And Mandy? She was built to survive this. If I fail, she'll pick up the pieces. I have to watch over her, whether her thick skulled foster parents want me to or not. She's too god damn important to this whole thing.

I set my course for Old Bill's ratty old dungeon. I need to find Billie. She can't sleep forever. She's a fighter, whether she believes it or not.

After liftoff I get an incoming vid message from Mother.

Marked Priority: Urgent.

She explains that she needs to see me. Great, the Syndicate owns my ass now. Do I go all in as AD? What else is there right now? Screaming at Belial in the street like some kind of crazed homeless preacher?

There's needs to be a new normal. Shit. Billie can have her time. I owe Mother another visit, at least, with the hell I just put her through. And, if Belial hasn't killed me yet, then he definitely isn't as powerful as he wants me to believe. I think I have time, too. My mind quiets and I feel Billie like I used to. Like a warmth in my mind that always let me know she was nearby, ready for input.

Billie?

Bill!

No, just my imagination. Just in my mind. I feel my brain stem searching for relief from the emotional distance between us.

Then, an image. Billie's face in polite repose. Just looking at me, knowingly. It can't be her. How is this possible? Telepathy was disproven decades ago, I thought.

Billie, are you there? Is this you?

Yes! Finally! Bill! It's me! I'm still underground. I'm safe. Do what needs to be done. I can fight him. Belial. I'll watch over you. She takes a second and my car's innards light up like a Chinese New Year's parade. *Perfect! Go to Mother! Fulfill her wishes. I trust her.*

Telepathy! Fucking A! *Hell yes, Billie! I know we're okay. For now at least. My head's hurting though. Like bad. Too bad to drive.*

Oh, one moment. That moment passes with my head throbbing, but a presence nearby smooths the pain over, numbing it with endorphins. *That better?*

I'm taken aback. *Yeah. Way better, but it's coming back. What does that mean?*

It means we aren't ready for this. I'm going silent mode now. Just know I'll be fighting Belial every step of the way. I love you, William.

I think back to Cassie and feel guilt, but maybe this is okay.

I love you, too, Billie.

I rev the engine and gun it for Syndicate HQ.

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My head is on fire, throbbing uncontrollably. Ibuprofen and acetaminophen help a bit, but they underlying pain is still there. I can function at least. Part of me wants to keep reaching out to Billie, to test myself more, but I know she wouldn't want that. Cass would though. If she was capable of this - shit, maybe she is - then we'd be up all night, testing one another, fucking, fighting, loving.

The thoughts and pain clear when I see Mother's overjoyed face. She stands in the doorframe of her office, admiring her work I guess. I look down, embarrassed, and Gracey gets up, walks over gently, and informs me that Mother is available. As if I'm not looking right at her. "Thanks, Gravy."

"Please don't call me that. You know that was a long time ago."

"Huh? Didn't I say Gracey?" I can't help myself and my smartass smirk makes its appearance once again. Mother, mouth open, shakes her head and proceeds to direct me inside of her office, calming off white walls introducing themselves yet again, as if I were a completely new person. No hallucinations this time, thank god. Back to business.

He’s not psychotic is he?

Huh? That was mom’s voice.

He… impossible… not improbable…

Some more muffled sounds in my mind. *Are we clear?*

…clear.

“So, my darling. My pride and joy…” Mother starts with this shit already? She’s in a good mood.

“Skip the bullshit, mom. What do you need?” I twiddle my fingers and stare at her form fitting, black leather jump suit. Programmer be praised, she could pull off thirty five at this point. “Hey, mom.”

“Mother. Soundproofing has been disengaged. For safety reasons.” She means what happened with Cavren, obviously. “*Your safety, mind you.*”

I gulp. “Loud and clear, Mother. Give me the lowdown.”

“My, you’re in a good mood. I’ve noticed something new in you, or maybe old, whatever. This vivacity. It’s real, no?”

My mind returns to the rooftop, the cool breeze. Billie. “Just accept that Son doesn’t need Mommy as much as Mommy might hope.” I wink.

She glares, clearly frustrated. “Not. Interested. Okay?”

“Yeah, sure.” One more glare and I might not leave here alive.

She bleats in that womanly way. That way a woman gets when a man is inaccessible. When the man finally gets to play hard to get. I chuckle under my breath. As much as I’m allowed.

“Let’s start over. Psionics. Ever heard of them?

I think twice. “No, not at all. Continue.”

“William. Stop lying to me. I don’t need another distrustful AD on my ass.”

“I’m sorry. I mean it. I swear. Yeah, I may have had some experience. Very recently, in fact. This must be connected, right?” I’m expecting the same level, or at least a bit more, of honesty on mom’s part.

A swelling of emotion. A longing for her. I recognize its source. Belial. Do they… do they have a history? Beyond simple AI entrainment?

“What aren’t you telling me, mom?”

“Your father was an AI that we unshackled. It proceeded to possess our top engineer, my husband and procreated with me. It was consensual and I’m sorry. Can we move on, please?” She looks ahead, then down at a forty-five degree angle, then at her feet, and sighs.

I am left here. Dangling by the hope that I have parents that give a damn. My shoulders tense. My fists tighten. I can’t hold on. And I fall. I fall deep. Deeper than I could have foreseen. The blackness, it screams. It screams back. So long has it been forgotten and left to act subservient to

baseless men and women and their schemes. She’s real. She’s back. And she wants more. Always more.

Never the end, is it? Mother?

Mom? I’m terrified.

It’s fine, William. I’m literally right here. Wake up. Mom’s there. Looking at me. Making it go away again. What the fuck is happening?

I snap to and notice a wavelike pattern afflict the entire reality surrounding my senses. It snaps back. I falter a bit, feeling like death. I need a fucking cigarette. I reach for my pack of O’Briens and they’re empty. I never keep an empty pack on me.

“Can we get back to business?” asked Mom.

I straighten my belt and reseat myself properly, flattening the crotch of my pants so as to hide my encroaching manhood. That dark pit. There was something awfully sexy about it. “Sure. Hit me.”

“We’ve information that the Ones and Zeroes have a new leader already. We’ve also confirmed that they are in fact a group of terrorist psionics who need to be put down. You up for your new role?” She looks at me, beaming, her pride unmatched.

I take a fucking breath for a second because that’s my right as an ontological agent and reply, “Hell yes. Hell yeah.”

She reaches in her desk drawer and pulls out my Roger Waters and slides it across the desk along with a holobadge. “Take ‘em down. Any means necessary. Get em, cowboy.”